

GIANT SPACE LIZARD!

VOLUME 1



by Garth Thompson
and Chad Wagner

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EVIL OF THE SMO!



Prologue

“Your seat is this way, sir,” said the Space Tram flight attendant, motioning down the narrow aisle of the small shuttle. Bryan Orion looked down the aisle, somewhat nervous that a new part of his life was about to begin.

He smiled slightly and said to the flight attendant, “Thanks, I've got to tell you I'm excited to meet my new GSL partner. He's an agent of the highest quality, I've been assured.” Growing up, Bryan had spent most of his time on planets dominated by his fellow unaltered humans. It wasn't until recently that he had interacted with Giant Space Lizards, also known as GSL. His boss, Vorpgrind, was also a GSL and had impressed him by asking about wonderwall forces when he'd learned Bryan had researched secondary physics at college. This had been totally unexpected coming from a career bureaucrat like Vorpgrind.

The flight attendant looked unamused and said to Bryan, “Oh, that one. He's in his seat already.” She quieted her voice somewhat and said, “not your typical lizard, you think?”

Bryan looked forward to the seat where his partner, Vagrond, was sitting. It was at that moment that Vagrond's head lolled back and he started snoring loudly. Bryan looks back to the flight attendant, “Yeah, not exactly what I was expecting.”

It was obvious that Vagrond was young from his bright green skin, reflecting some of the surrounding light like smooth metal. He wore a yellow t-shirt and old looking blue jeans and his head was almost twice as

long as Vorpgrind's and three times that of a human. As he continued to snore away, each and every carnivorous tooth shone brightly.

Much more shocking to Bryan was the fact that Vagrond had taken the entire drink cart from the aisle and propped it on the seat next to him. The whole aisle rank of alcohol and at least six cans and two bottles lay empty.

Bryan's thoughts quickly shifted from excitement to annoyance at a scene he had acted out more than once. "Hey! Wake Up! I need to get into my seat!" Bryan said.

"Huh?" said Vagrond, half-opening his eyes.

Vagrond sat up, obviously a little unsteady, and smiled widely, three crooked teeth visible on the side of his closed mouth. "You're Brain, right?" he said as Bryan lowered his eyebrows, "Nice to meet you. Sorry, when I heard our receipts didn't list what we bought on them I just kinda plunged."

Vagrond extended his right hand for Bryan to shake but it hung loosely in the air as Bryan pointed at the cart and said, "You appropriated the liquor cart?"

Vagrond was still smiling with his hand outstretched as Bryan took a step back and said, "Look, I just started this job. There's things I need you to say and you're not saying them," Bryan then raised his voice, "like getting my name correct – for example!"

Vagrond was startled, and frowned slightly. He looked over Bryan, a human like many he'd seen before. Vagrond quickly scanned him for traits so that he could tell him apart from the other humans he'd known and avoid an embarrassing situation in the future. Bryan had stark black hair, almost shining, but it was fairly short and none of it was on his face. Bryan wore

nicer clothes, a black collarless vest and shirt like a businessman would wear. Vagrond decided to remember the fact that Bryan was a bit taller than most humans and had a bit bigger eyebrows than most, or at least they looked bigger, that was good enough for now.

Vagrond, ignoring the pounding in his head, turned over towards the beverage cart and picked it up. "Fine," he said, "be a jerk and don't shake my hand. It's not like they have Lizard Liquor on a lot of shuttles, you know." Vagrond dropped the cart carelessly in the aisle with a loud crash, then brushed the cans and bottles off Bryan's seat.

Vagrond got into his seat and fastened his seatbelt. As he was doing the same Bryan said, "Look, the name is Bryan, OK? Bryan! The usual spelling." The cans and bottles rolled slightly at his feet.

Vagrond gripped his now throbbing forehead and said, "Ooh, my head. Can we hold off the spelling test until we're in space?"

A few more people boarded the shuttle and Bryan sat quietly looking out of the window. Eventually the small, boxlike shuttle disengaged from the station and headed out into space.

"Name's Vagrond," Vagrond said.

Now in space, the flight attendant had brought Vagrond an ice pack to hold against his eye-ridges, which reduced the hangover a little. Bryan continued to wear a grumpy expression, but decided to make the best of the situation. "Our boss hired you?" he said.

"Not what you were expecting from a lizard, huh?" said Vagrond.

Bryan reeled slightly from Vagrond bringing up the stereotype unexpectedly, “um...no...I mean GSL are usually so...”

Vagrond stopped him, “Yeah, mostly eggheads. Well, me too... kind of,” said Vagrond as he pointed at a large lambda logo on his shirt, “I almost graduated from Alpha Centauri!”

“Isn't that a big safety school?” asked Bryan.

“I dunno,” said Vagrond, “I majored in shot-put.”

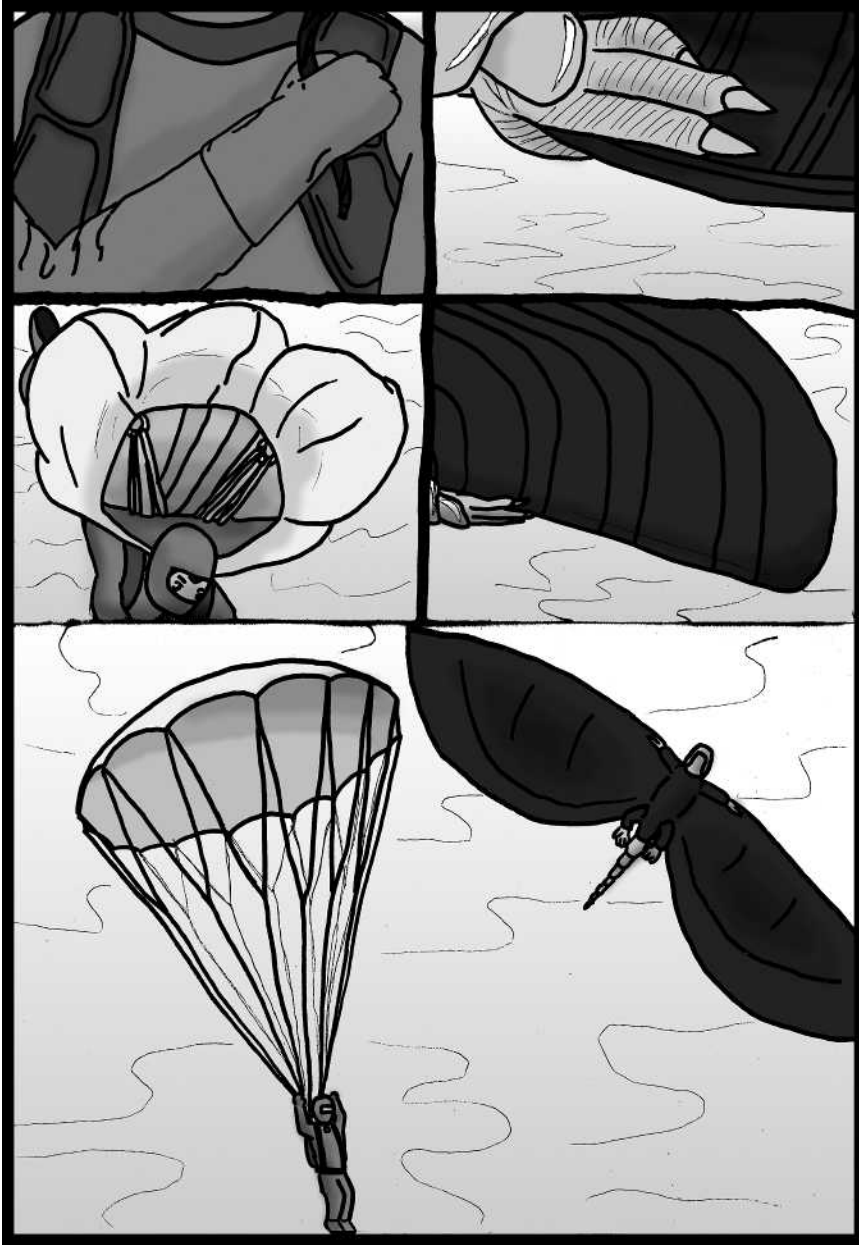
“PASSENGERS BRYAN ORION AND VAGROND PLEASE DISEMBARK,” screeched the shuttle's PA system. Bryan looked out of the window and saw the planet they were assigned to inspect below.

Bryan and Vagrond moved to the airlock. Bryan put on his spacesuit and parachute, and Vagrond struggled slightly in putting on the black cape that Space Tram provided GSL passengers.

“These things are so hard to get on,” he said to Bryan, “don't know what the Aurons were thinking.”

Bryan didn't respond, as he already had his helmet on. As the shuttle flew a safe distance over the planet the airlock opened allowing Bryan and Vagrond to jump out towards the planet below...

I. Falling





Hand Signals: (IF)-(YOU)-(WENT)-(ALPHA CENTAURI)-(WHY)-(SHIRT)-(L)-(NOT)-(A)

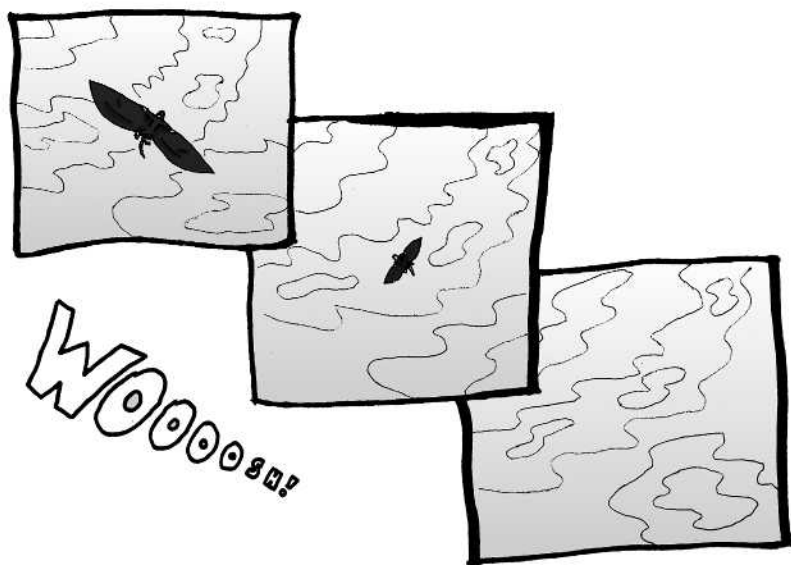
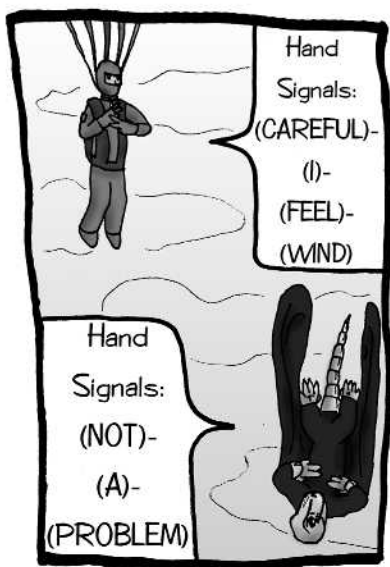
Hand Signals: (YOU)-(KNOW)-(GSL)-(VACUUM SIGNS)-(COOL)-(?)

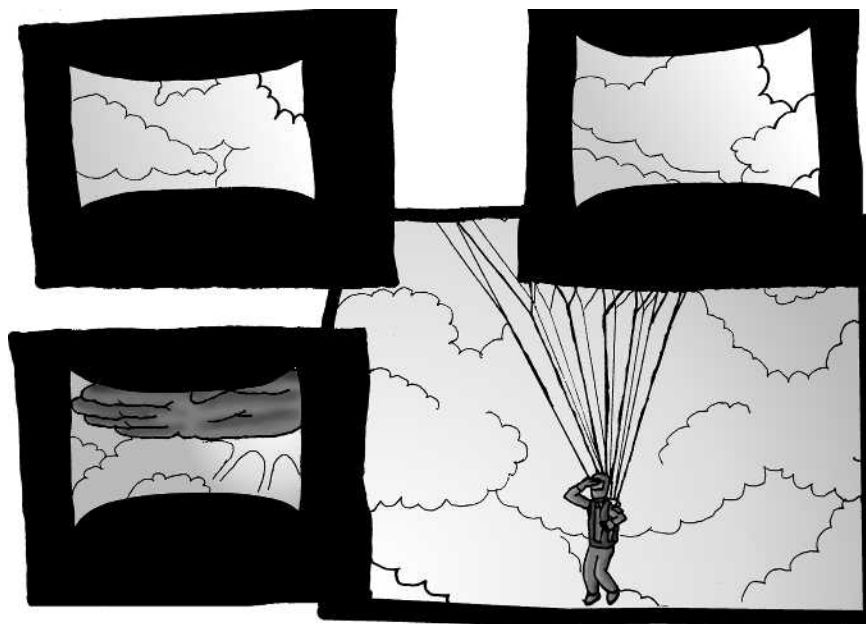
Hand Signals: (I)-(LEARN-ED)-(GSL)-(VACUUM SIGNS)-(AT)-(SCHOOL)

Hand Signals: (SPEAK-ING)-(OF)-(WHY)-(L)-(NOT)-(A)-(?)

Hand Signals: (ONCE)-(AFTER)-(PARTY)-(I)-(PASSED)-(OUT)-(ROOMMATES)-(REMOVE)-(MIDDLE)-(LINE)

Hand Signals: ('L')-(EQUALS)-(GSL)-(GET)-(IT)-(?)





As Vagrond disappeared over the horizon, Bryan cursed the poor visibility of his coach class Space Tram helmet. Vagrond, instead, attempted a quick mental calculation to figure out where Bryan would land.

Unfortunately all Vagrond knew about “trajectory” was that it was the name of a bar in the Tau Ceti system.



While happy not to have fallen into a sewer, Vagrond was surprised to see that the roads were built directly above the soil on this planet.

II. Leisure Class

Vagrond inspected the projectile that hit him, just a rock, and then looked up to see a small giggling human, probably a hatchling. The little human giggled and ran toward the backyard of one of the houses. In his frustration he immediately chased after the hatching that had aggravated his already

pounding headache. He stopped short when the hatchling ran behind one of the matured humans. It was only then that he realized a large group of humans were staring at him.

Though he never could quite tell with humans, the crowd seemed like a good mix of ages, colors and genders. Yet all of them were wearing similar outfits; a white shirt, short or long sleeved, white shorts or pants, and a kind of vest that looked like it was made from 2 triangular sheets. Embroidered on every vest were the words “Leisure Class”. One of the humans said, “What are you?”

Feeling sheepish Vagrond held his hand behind his head and said, “Um, I don't get asked what I am a lot...aren't there any Lizards on this...?” Vagrond trailed off as he noticed all of the humans had scattered away shortly after he started speaking. This lack of curiosity confused Vagrond. If these people didn't know what a lizard was they were bound to be confused and inquisitive, but instead were wandering around, hanging on each other like the little mammals that they were.

“Hey you didn't finish!” said a high-pitched voice. Vagrond spun around and stood up on his hind legs. Standing there was a human, a younger female by Vagrond's best judgement, with short, spiky yellow hair.

“What's going on, why'd they all leave?” asked Vagrond.

“I guess you just didn't hold their interest,” said the human.

“But you want an explanation?” said Vagrond, “Um, sure. What's your name?”

“I'm Hedy Lamarr, and you are?”

“Name's Vagrond.”

“No, I meant to ask the same thing as before, what are you?”

“Oh! Well, I'm a lizard. A giant space lizard or GSL is what we're formally called, I guess. Don't you have any gelfs on this planet? Lizards are the most common genetically engineered life form,” Vagrond started to explain.

III. Moon Slaves

Bryan landed in much different surroundings than his partner. He could see very little as he was falling, his vision obscured by layer upon layer of smog. At least there's people here, he thought lightly. One of the neighbors of this planet had complained that it had quit communicating and they hadn't seen space traffic leaving for two decades, indicating abandonment. As inspectors, Bryan and Vagrond had to see if this was the case, or if there were any local property violations.

Finally the ground came into view and Bryan saw a large rectangular factory, surrounded by what looked like a trough of mud.

It was into this mud that Bryan landed, sinking up to his knees and having a good deal more splash on his suit. He removed the mud covered helmet and found two large, burly men looking at him, each wearing jeans and what appeared to be a brown vest made out of tattered rags. Each of the men aimed a slug rifle at him.

"Stop right there moon slave!", said the first armed man.

"What's going on?" said Bryan.

Ignoring Bryan, one of the armed men walked up to him and inspected his space-suit. "It's a space suit. And with heat-shielding no less! It looks like we've got a moon escapee here!"

"A what?" yelled Bryan, "No, I'm from the inspections. You know, I work for the local government. You should have been contacted by your local..."

“Guvvamint? What the hell is that?” asked one man to the other.

“I don’t know, but I think we’d better send this moon slave right to the SMO for inspection and punishment.”

The two armed men pulled Bryan out of the mud and they each grabbed one of his arms, forcing him to walk towards the factory’s massive doors. “Who are you, what are doing, where are you taking me, and who is the suhmow?” Bryan asked.

“We’re moon slaves just like you, except we’re guards. I am Veronica Lake,” he pointed at himself, “and this is Joan Fontaine,” gesturing to the other man. We’re taking you back where you belong, and if you don’t know who the SMO is, then you should be part of the leisure class!”

Bryan struggled somewhat but was ultimately dragged inside the factory. The inside was covered with multiple square brown levels, each filled with people sitting on folding chairs. The front of each level opened to the front of the factory, leaving each level plainly visible. All of the people were standing in front of machines, sewing together pieces of cloth. For what seemed like a simple task, the machines each had a series of jagged blades where you would expect to see a sewing needle.

As Bryan watched, a man on the third level of the factory slipped while feeding cloth into his machine, sending a good deal of blood into the air as a scream was heard. One of the moon-slave guards turned Bryan away and they continued. Eventually they reached a wall through which none of the levels passed and had numerous small, unmarked doors accessible only from that floor. They reached an open door and the guards pushed Bryan in roughly and slammed the door behind him.

Bryan looked around the room and realized it was completely bare and hardly had enough room for him to brush off his mud covered spacesuit. He sat down in a corner of the room and removed a thick packet of forms from his suit. 'Notice of failure to submit to inspection', 'notice of excess trash stored on asteroids', and so forth. Bryan thought that maybe if he showed his captors these forms they'd let him go, but what about Vagrond? He had been more interested in the recreational beverages cart than proper policy so it wasn't likely he had bothered to bring official identification! These men had mentioned an authority of some type, Bryan thought that perhaps when he met with them he could show them the forms, possibly threatening them with a safety violation or a citation for felony loitering. Whatever the case, he needed to find Vagrond as soon as possible to save him from whatever bizarre rules these locals were following.

With that thought, two new guards came inside the room and stripped Bryan of his wallet and keys. They also took the forms at his request, promising to show them to their authority figure. They handed Bryan a brown vest made out of rags and left the room.

A man wearing a doctor's robe, covered with the same brown ragged vest the guards had worn, opened the door and came in. Without allowing a word in edgewise, he asked Bryan Orion his name, age and allergies. He then put his hand outside the door and grabbed a large metal device, pulsating with needles on it. The device was jabbed into Bryan and painfully took a blood sample from his arm.

"Ow! Damn it, what are you doing? What's going on here?" screamed Bryan to no avail. The doctor left and two new guards came in, grabbed him and dragged him out the door, leaving the room empty save for the tattered vest Bryan hadn't had even had a chance to try on.

“You can’t do this to me! I work for the local government! I’m a well respected citizen!”

The new room appeared to be a hangar of sorts, with one grayish wall of a spaceship visible on the right side of the room, and a half dozen people in the brown vests on the left standing at attention. A door opened silently on the spaceship, bottom to top, and the people began to enter.

“Where are you taking me! Did I break some local law? Tell me the charges or I’ll file an improper policing violation against your planet! This is illegal!”

They took Bryan, yelling constantly, into the spaceship. They fastened him with a variety of harnesses to a seat not unlike one on a proper space shuttle.

Bryan felt a rumbling and the distinct feeling of weightlessness. It was clear that whoever these people were, they were taking him off the planet.

IV. The Truck

In the past few hours Vagrond had learned at least as much about the Leisure Class as they knew about themselves. They didn't actually do anything. They certainly didn't work, and had no money, but all of their needs were provided for them. By who, well they didn't know. And what did they do in all their free time? Nothing. They didn't exercise, watch movies, play sports or anything that might actually be associated with leisure. They just kind of wandered around aimlessly, eating, sleeping, and not much else.

Their lot in life was to do nothing, it seemed. And though Vagrond knew he could be a little dense mentally himself, even he could tell that none of the people here were very happy. In fact, according to Hedy, several had committed suicide.

Hedy Lamarr was the only person here who seemed to have any interest in anything. She actually had asked Vagrond questions about what a giant lizard was doing here, and, while not appearing very concerned that Bryan was lost, she apparently wanted to help.

To get food, and more help, Vagrond followed Hedy to a building, larger than the houses but the same pale color, and apparently some sort of common area. The inside had only a few members of the Leisure Class in it, all eating a sort of white slop out of gray ceramic bowls. A few of them were sitting on each other or leaning on each other heavily. Hedy retrieved bowls for herself and Vagrond from the far end of the room.

Vagrond sniffed his bowl. "What is this, fruit or vegetable?"

“I don’t know anything about any roots in food, but the only food here is the cactato,” said Hedy.

“The what?” responded Vagrond.

“It is the perfect food. It was created by mixing a cactus and something called a potato. The outsides of the plants are hard and spiny and the insides are the part we eat, and it comes mushed up like that. They tried making an animal one once so that the potato could put butter on itself, called the cactanimal, but that didn’t work.”

“Uh, okay”, said Vagrond looking at the white mush. “I guess you guys wouldn't know, but lizards like me can't eat solid veggies like this. Only fruits, or juices, and even that doesn't really provide any,” Vagrond paused, looking at Hedy's empty expression, then said, “Uh, I don’t really need food right now anyway. You said we might also be able to get help here?”

“Yeah”, said Hedy as they moved out of the area with the bowls into another part of the building. This part had more people in it, many of whom were kind of piled onto each other. Once again they did not seem to be doing anything besides wandering aimlessly. Hedy walked up to one of the people, a young man, and tugged on his triangular white vest.

“Hey Hedy Lamarr, you have a big lizard with you!” the young man said.

“Hey Rita Hayworth, this is Vagrond and he needs our help,” Hedy said to him, pointing at Vagrond.

“Why does your finger need help?” said Rita.

“I wasn’t talking about my finger,” said Hedy, who was now smiling and giggling slightly.

“The bowl?” said Rita, looking very confused and at the bowl of white mush which Hedy had just set down.

Vagrond certainly did not consider himself a particularly smart lizard, and certainly nothing compared to his brother, his sister, or even his new boss, Vorpgrind. In fact Vagrond wasn't completely sure what it was Vorpgrind wanted him to do in this situation. The planet obviously wasn't abandoned, so Vagrond just figured he'd find Bryan, who seemed to have a good head on his shoulders, and ask him what to do. However it was becoming clear that he might be the smartest being on this planet, given how the Leisure Class was acting. “She's pointing at me,” he said.

“It talks!” said Rita.

“It’s a moron,” said Vagrond, irritated but correctly guessing that the human wouldn't get the insult. The room was warm, but outside of the sun so Vagrond wasn't getting any warmer himself, a situation that made most lizards somewhat uncomfortable. Vagrond calmed down and said, “are you willing to help me locate the guy who came here with me? We're from property inspection.”

“Is the finger one of them?” asked Rita, now seeming even more confused by Vagrond's sarcasm.

“No, he's a human, same as you,” Vagrond thought for a minute then said, “tall with big black eyebrows.”

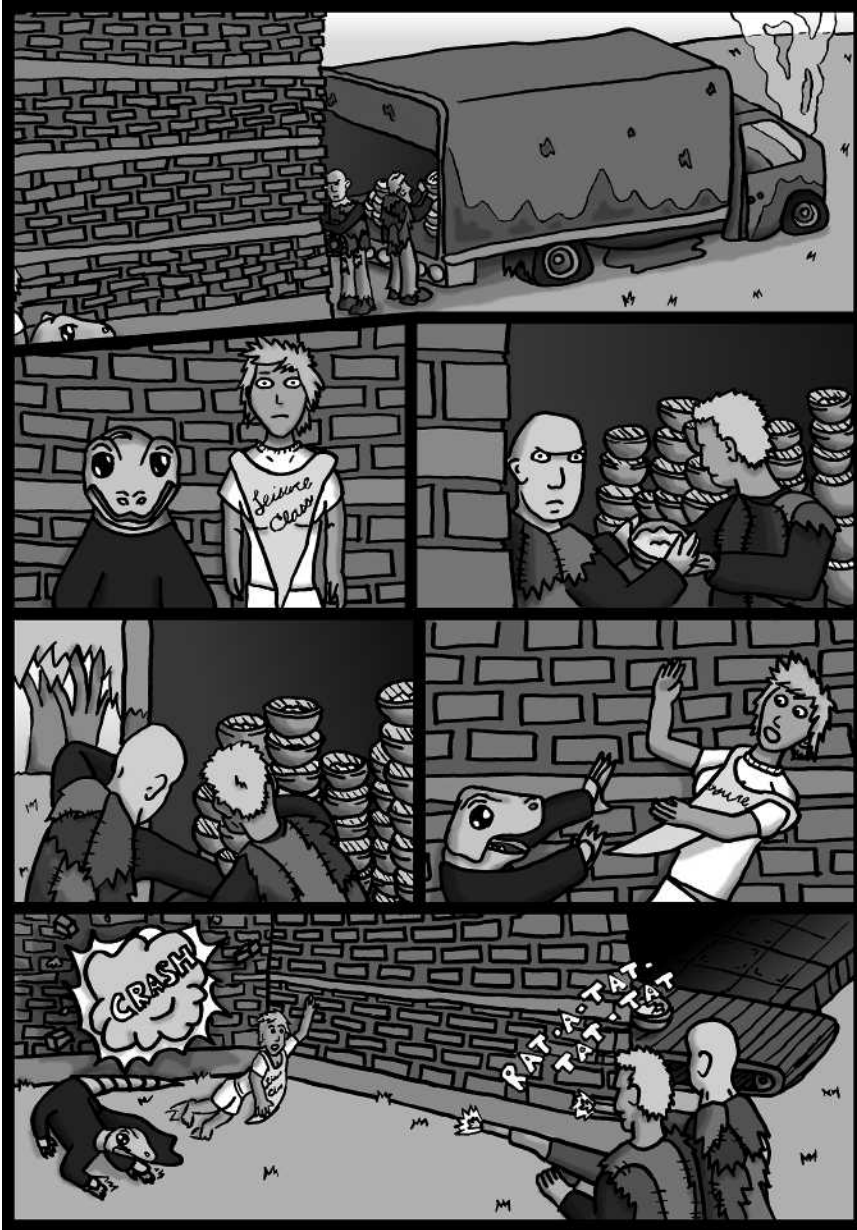
Rita looked around the room, looked back at Vagrond and shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe we should go,” said Vagrond to Hedy. “There’s nobody home here.”

As they were leaving the large building, Vagrond realized something, “Say Hedy,” he asked, “how did you know where the food came from. That seems like more information than anyone else here seems to have access to.”

“The moon slaves told me when I asked them,” said Hedy, “They also say a mistake was made and I should be living where they live, but they won’t tell anyone so I don’t have to leave.”

“Moon slaves? That sounds a little worse than Leisure Class. Where did you talk to them?” said Vagrond.

Hedy led Vagrond around a corner outside the large building...





Fear gripped Vagrond for a moment, but looking down he saw his arm and tail were not badly injured. He thought quickly - these guns were probably not enough to take down a lizard, but if they got a direct shot at him they could send him to the hospital for a while.





Vagrond motioned to Hedy and she came over by him.

“Do you have any rope or something similar in that truck?” Vagrond asked the man he had the gun pointed at. The other may lay on the ground, clutching his arm and moaning.

“Y-Yes...we were using b-bungee cords to hold down some of the cactato bowls...” said the obviously frightened moon slave.

“Good. Hedy, can you tie a knot?” Vagrond asked.

“Knot?” was her reply.

Vagrond sighed audibly and very carefully handed the weapon to Hedy, while keeping it pointed at his hostage. He placed her index finger on the gun’s trigger and said, “Now if he tries to get away, pull here.”

The moon-slave now looked even more nervous. Vagrond said to him, “Well somebody has to tie you up, and it’s easier to teach someone to use a gun than to make a knot!”

This clearly didn’t make the man feel any better as Hedy kept the gun on him while Vagrond went to get the bungee cords.

V. The Moon

Bryan didn't quite understand how things had got this bad. This was supposed to be a routine check to see if anyone was living on the planet. He wasn't supposed to get arrested by the local hick police and get taken off planet. Bryan thought he was supposed to be too smart to get into a fix like this one.

The seats on the spaceship were much like the seats on an ancient airplane from the Age of Might, being in even rows. There were only a few people, a few of these moon-slaves on the spaceship towards the front, and most of the seats were empty. Bryan was fastened tightly with two diagonal straps across his chest, but his arms were free. There was nothing he could reach, though, just other seats and the floor, and he could not struggle free from the straps.

He realized that to his right was the edge of the spacecraft, and there was a panel which could open to some sort of external window. Bryan now felt around under his seat for levers or buttons, found two, and upon cranking the first one the panel covering his window opened slowly.

Outside was outer space, the million points of light that was a view Bryan had become too familiar with lately. Where could they be going, Bryan thought. The stars didn't seem to be moving too fast but it could be misleading. They could be light years from the planet already. Suddenly an object came into view.

The object was square and flat, colored white, lit by red, green and blue circles of neon. Printed on the white part were giant black letters, "ALL

WORK IS FOR THE SMO.” The ship passed by this floating billboard and another one appeared reading “THE SMO BRINGS JUSTICE TO ALL”.

Wonderful, thought Bryan, this planet has propaganda floating in space. You'd think the neighboring planets would've noticed that before they filed the abandoned planet complaint. He then tried the other button beneath his chair, and heard a whirring noise above him. Looking up he saw another panel open quickly as a small, tan, ceramic bowl fell to his lap with a thud that stung his legs for a moment. The bowl was filled with mashed potatoes.

The potatoes didn't have any butter, sour-cream or chives on them, but Bryan was hungry and gave them a try. They tasted odd, a little like aloe. Outside his window, the planet's single, luna-like moon became visible, and very large.

VI. The Desert

Vagrond turned the wheel of the truck with his left hand and pushed down harder on the rightmost pedal. He had operated other ground-based transportation when he was a kid, and this one did not seem too complicated. The truck drove down a plain, unmarked road through a large desert, filled with yellow sands and spiny green plants that were probably cactatoes.

Inside the truck were Vagrond, Hedy, and the two moon-slaves they had captured, bound tightly in connected bungee cords. The one who was uninjured had been continuously complaining about his bonds, “Honestly, mister giant lizard sir, we had no idea you were a, what was it? A gelf? We thought you were an animal that had wandered into the town. Now that I

know you're intelligent I will help you if you'll just loosen these bonds somewhat..."

"I'd sooner eat a cactato. Now, you and your slumbering friend here seem to have a good deal mentally over the Leisure Class," said Vagrond.

"Yes," said the moon-slave, "the Leisure Class consists of only of people who aren't capable of working, at least, not until a certain point. They get a sweet deal though, seeing as how hard the work is. That's why Lana and I never reported Hedy, even though she seemed capable!"

"It's not very 'sweet' in the Leisure Class," said Hedy, "it got soooo booooring that I had to invent hundreds of games using only sticks, grass and dirt!"

"It's better than the alternative," said the moon-slave.

"Which is what exactly," asked Vagrond, "being a slave?"

"Not a slave," said the man, "a moon-slave. It's just what we're called because that's what the SMO chooses to call it. We're actually free to work whatever job we want and do almost anything in our free time."

"Who is the shmow?" asked Vagrond.

"SMO is an acronym for Supreme Moon Overlord. The SMO is the most wealthy man on this planet and therefore the most powerful," explained the man, "He has been for over twenty years now. When all the jobs got bad he brought order and justice to our society."

"All the jobs got bad?" Vagrond was curious.

“Yes, it seems like centuries ago, but it was actually only twenty-two years ago. So much has changed since then. Slowly, over the course of a couple of years, there were less and less jobs available, and every job got more dangerous, you know...”

“No, I don’t, but continue.”

“Anyway, there were so few jobs, and then one day the wealthiest man on the planet, Judy Garland, moved to the moon and built cities made out of gold there. He also created a great system of missiles aimed at the planet. He effectively took the world hostage and forced all of the countries to set everything right again, except he couldn’t fix the jobs. While everyone had a job, and no one paid taxes or went to jail for the wrong reasons, all of the jobs were still bad and that has continued to this day. The SMO has promised he will work on a solution, however, and we all trust him.”

“Yet you would prefer the boredom of the Leisure Class,” said Hedy to the moon-slave.

“Yes,” he responded, “it seems like as good a place as any to wait until the SMO gets things straightened out.”

Vagrond didn’t quite know what to think of all this, but then decided that this planet’s problems were probably not really his business. As long as he explained what he saw to Vorpgrind the old politician could probably just send some marines over to clear it up. Vagrond decided to instead just concentrate on finding Bryan. “You said that this road leads to a factory of yours?” Vagrond asked.

“Yes,” said the moon-slave, “It is a food packaging conglomerate. Next to it is a textiles shop where they reported finding someone falling from the sky.

Sounds like your friend. Hey, by the way, if you're from another planet, how come you can speak common so well?"

Vagrond didn't want to go over the whole story again of his people's creation, so he simply said, "I used mail order tapes," as he continued to drive the truck through the yellow wasteland.

VII. SMO

From his window Bryan could see the spaceship descend onto the moon, though the closer he got the less the moon looked like any he'd seen on another planet. It appeared to be covered in cities made out of gold! Giant yellow spirals peaked into the void of space, and great flat surfaces were covered with a square pattern that shined in the light of the sun. Some buildings had tops like minarets while some looked more like they had multiple eaves. All the buildings seemed to follow a spiral pattern, which the spaceship followed to its center, a giant fortress, shining a dark golden color, and built like a feudal castle.

The window closed and Bryan could feel the spaceship landing. The two guards from the factory came back from the front of the spaceship, unlocked his harness with what looked like a card, grabbed him, and took him out.

He was taken inside another tan room, and here two people in doctor robes and vests, a man and a woman, were sitting at a desk.

“Hello, Mister Orion”, said the female doctor, “I am Doctor Ava Gardner and this is my associate Doctor Ingrid Bergman. I trust your trip to the moon was well?”

Bryan was past the point of resisting physically, but he could still muster up some defiance. “I'm here for reasons related to your owned property! Why the hell do doctors keep talking to me?!?” he asked sharply.

“What about property?” responded the confused Doctor Bergman. Doctor Gardner looked at him angrily, and he promptly stopped.

“It is clear that your inter-satellite trip has left you disoriented,” said Doctor Gardner, “nevertheless, the SMO wishes to speak to you immediately.” She then nodded to the guards behind Bryan as they grabbed him tightly and shoved him through a door into a much darker room. The guards did not follow.

It either took Bryan’s eyes a moment to adjust, or the lights in the room brightened, but either way he was shocked by what he saw. He was standing on a long platform made out of metal. Beneath him, a fatal drop away, was what looked like a hollowed out part of the moon. It was gray and filled with craters, and had many areas artificially dug out.

Filling this cavern must have been hundreds of people, all wearing not much more than the brown, presumably moon-slave, ragged vest. The people were young, old, middle-aged, missing limbs and not missing limbs, black and red and blond and brown haired. They all had pickaxes and were chopping away at the rock and sand of the moon, and they all seemed to be collectively moaning.

At the end of the platform that Bryan was on, was a three meter tall throne fitted with purple cushions, and adorned with what appeared to be cleaned femurs. The throne was flanked by probably the biggest human man that Bryan had ever seen on one side and definitely the biggest human woman he’d ever seen on the other side. There also was a man seated in the throne. Lacking anywhere else to go Bryan walked, stunned, down the platform towards this.

“They only moan,” Bryan could hear the man in the throne say, “because they know the truth. The others all labor silently.”

The man in the throne was very short, perhaps only a hundred and twenty centimeters tall, and his brown hair went straight down to the top of his eyes, in a circle around his head. He was wearing a long purple robe with red lining, adorned with spikes on the shoulders, hands and toes. Bryan, stunned, could only manage, “W-who?”

“I am the Supreme,” suddenly the giant neon word ‘Supreme’ lit up behind the man in the throne, “Moon,” the word ‘Moon’ lit up now, “Overlord,” ‘Overlord’ lit also, “however all others simply call me SMO.” All the letters besides the first ones switched off on the neon signs, leaving simply ‘S M O’.

Bryan still found it hard to speak, but the SMO continued talking, “I have learned much about you, Mister Orion, from these forms you were kind enough to give us!” The SMO then reached behind the throne and pulled out the forms that Bryan had handed to the moon slave earlier.

“It's been most helpful to know that you're from the government,” said the SMO, “As a being from a different planet, you give me an odd opportunity to brag! I will tell you of my greatest achievements!

“Accumulating money is a game that is fun to play, yet for me it was too easy a game to win. Three decades previous I controlled a major company that controlled a majority of this world’s wealth, and imagine my happiness. Yet I grew tired of growing richer every minute. I needed a new pursuit, and surely the most pure would either be the joy or misery of sentients. I chose the latter.

“Yet people have a tendency to, how can I say this, resist misery somewhat. I needed a way to make them accept their suffering, and I found it in my previous pursuits.

“The people of land and moon toil endlessly at painful jobs which I have hand crafted to be excessively frustrating, menial and dangerous. They don’t try to get their old jobs back and they don’t try to overthrow me. And you know why? Capital. I pay them well so they do their jobs well, not caring that the only reason their jobs are so hard is to let me enjoy their suffering.”

The SMO now laughed somewhat, “They even call themselves moon-slaves and they still do not care! I put some of them away in mindlessly boring towns for no reason, then bring them back, so they suffer



more due to their lack of resistance to suffering, and still people accept this! I develop a bland foodstuff that serves no purpose, ban all other kinds of foods, and they still accept this! All because they think their wages are good. They even think I bring justice and equality, which I suppose is true for all suffer equally. The only ones who know the truth are the ones in this room, their suffering is the most severe.

“And I have another use for you besides bragging, Mister Orion, through this,” the SMO then shuffled through the set of forms, and removed from the back a few pages with more text and some images on them, stapled together. Looking at the packet, Bryan realized it was a recent research article he'd wanted to read. Something about how the immortals had controlled time, including some ideas how it might be done.

The SMO held up the paper and said, “seems that since I took over this planet, some hotshots elsewhere are trying to figure out how the immortals managed interdimensional cord theory, hmm?”

Bryan's heart was pounding, his vision blurring, and in his head he was becoming more frightened. Altering things on a level of universal constants might have been the bread and butter of the old ones, but it was somewhere even experts feared to tread now, for good reasons Bryan thought. He tried to assert himself by saying, “You'll never get away with this, uh, my boss Vorpgrind will notice that my partner and I are gone! He'll send help!”

“You should not dislike me, Mister Orion,” said the SMO, “I just want your help with one little thing,” the SMO tossed the article to Bryan, “After you help me I will find Vagrond for you, and then let you go. You can fill out whatever forms you want about us when you get back home. I won't even torture you, as much as I would enjoy it, because I want us to be friends.”

“I won't do it, whatever it is!” yelled Bryan.

“I'm afraid you will, my new friend. But all in good time. My henchmen, Helga and Bobbi ‘The Pill’ Neckbreaker will escort you to your room,” said the SMO, gesturing to the two giants on either side of the throne.

The male henchman, Bobbi, smacked his fists together and said, “The Pill cures what ails ya!”

The SMO then said, “I must apologize for Bobbi, you see, when he was young his father would beat him he told him that he had to ‘take his medicine’, and I guess that stuck.” As Bobbi and Helga were leading Bryan away, the SMO said, “You know Bryan, my greatest achievement is probably the cactato foodstuff. Just to even to make a place where it could grow I had to air-lift an entire northern rocky island and move it to the tropics? I’m sure you don’t want to know how many millions of people died. Of course it caused even more trouble when I added monkey DNA to...”

As if on cue, a loud crash was heard and the entire room shook violently. Bryan almost lost his balance and the SMO fell back into his throne. A loud hissing noise was heard from the direction of the throne, from behind which came an older man with gray hair, wearing typical moon-slave clothing with the addition of what appeared to be a metal box strapped to his right shoulder. Several wires from the box connected to the man’s head in a disgusting fashion. The man said, “SMO, we have an incoming message from an unidentified space vessel!”

“Let me see...” said the SMO. The man walked over to a corner and began turning a large crank.

Suddenly a large white canvas was lowered into the open area from out of nowhere, and a blurred image with washed out color shimmered into view. The image was of a small room, with many computer consoles off to each side. Standing in the front of the image was what appeared to be a spiny, spherical cactus with two little green arms and two little green legs. Behind him manning the consoles was another cactus plus a human wearing all black including a black fez.

The cactus spoke, “This is the Cactanimal Rebellion to the SMO. We have your castle covered with our weapons. Surrender peacefully and you will not be harmed!”

VIII. The Factory

Vagrond finally set free the two moon-slaves when he came to their building, however he did take their two ragged moon-slave vests. The two moon-slaves seemed to be more frightened by this than by anything, and quickly ran off after this happened. Vagrond did not pursue them. Vagrond was able to finally put on one of the vests after tearing it down its center, and Hedy put hers on, though not without some complaining about how dirty it was. She had never had to wear anything that dirty before.

It was quite cooler here, which Vagrond was pleased with since the sun was shining anyway, but Hedy was shivering. She grabbed Vagrond but unlike all the people she had known he was totally cold when she touched him, it was like hugging a wall somewhat, so she stopped.

Vagrond said, “whew! This place smells. The people here obviously don’t keep as clean as you do in the Leisure Class.”

“That’s OK,” said Hedy, “At least it’s different.” And it certainly was. The ground had no grass on it, only a deep brown color of mud, a pure mud without too many rocks in it. Similar in color to the mud was a giant building that was very rectangular. To her even the sky here was different, instead of pale blue it had a wonderful gray and red texture, like a perennial sunset.

Vagrond and Hedy walked up to the building, which had two moon-slave guards just outside it. The guards raised their weapons at Vagrond and Hedy, but then lowered them when they saw the vests. Vagrond had a plan.

“Greetings. I am a genetic experiment of top priority that was carried out by the SMO,” Vagrond said, and then pointed to Hedy and tried to remember his mythology class, “this is my scientist, uhh, Frank Sinatra?”

“Hello!” said Hedy.

“I am looking for a man who fell from the sky about seven hours ago,” continued Vagrond, “He's tall with black eyebrows or something. A reliable source tells me that he is here.”

“We did have him here, experiment,” said the guard, apparently accepting Vagrond’s story entirely, “but he was ordered to be taken to the moon immediately.”

Vagrond looked as quizzical as a giant reptile could look, and then said, trying to sound as official as possible, “My scientist and I will require transportation to the moon.”

“Very well,” said the guard, “I will arrange for it, but I warn you, it could be up to 24 hours.”

“I understand,” said Vagrond. The guards then opened the door for Hedy and him.

As they walked inside Vagrond whispered to Hedy, “If this takes too long, I can try to get to the moon by myself using my cape, but I’d rather take their spaceship so you can come with, I may need help.”

“How can you be sure that your friend won’t leave without you?” Hedy asked.

“Uh, well our boss would probably get pretty mad if he did,” Vagrond said, reaching inside his black cape and pulling out a stack of papers, crumpled and muddy. “Plus I brought all of these forms, which will probably come in handy,” said Vagrond, “I mean there's at least some serious misuse of handicapped personnel happening here at a minimum.”

Hedy heard Vagrond, but she did not react. The inside of the factory was buzzing with layer upon layer of moving people, shiny, buzzing machines and shuffling papers. Because she did not understand the horror occurring in the factory, she simply let her senses be overloaded and enjoyed the experience.

IX. The Loose Screw

“Damn those Cactanimals!” yelled the SMO, “Activate the fission beam!” The gray haired man turned another crank built into the wall, this one as tall as he was.

In an instant the screen's projection switched to show outer space directly above the SMO's castle. A menacing looking ship was floating there, appearing much like a big metallic lemon with two smaller lemons connected to it on either side with toothpicks. A stream of gray energy crackled up towards the ship, yet at the last instant before it struck it dissipated, as if it tried to go around the ship and failed.

“Looks like we're not the only ones salvaging ancient tech, Lord SMO,” said the old man with the box hooked to his head, “We can probably assume that because it diverted our beam it would divert any form of photonic energy, even radio waves used to communicate.”

“I see,” said the SMO, “This changes nothing between you and me, Mister Orion. In fact, now I want you to get to work immediately!”

Bobbi and Helga grabbed Bryan and dragged him back down the platform, Bryan still carrying the packet of papers. At the end of the platform the door opened again and they went through. They then let go of Bryan and, realizing that struggle was useless, he followed them voluntarily. They went through a variety of doors and corridors, some solid gold but most simple moon slave tan, until they came into a large room in which there were five more people, moon slaves all, and also all with the box that had red, green and yellow wires connecting to shaved places on their heads. The room had

many tables and a variety of other apparatus sitting around, as befits a laboratory. Neckbreaker and Helga left.

“Greetings Mister Orion, I am doctor Myrna Loy” said one of the men with the boxes.

“What are those things that go into your heads?” asked Bryan, both disgusted and curious.

“They are additional Brain modules,” said Doctor Loy, “ancient technology of the immortals we were lucky enough to find. They allow us to remember large amounts of ASCII text and retrieve it automatically. Would you like to be equipped with one?”

ASCII sounded vaguely historical, but Bryan didn’t quite remember what it meant. Bryan just said, “No, no brain modules for me thank you.”

“You will help us,” said Doctor Loy, “Because if you do not we will instruct them to kill you, at which point we will take over without your help. And I assure you, we would discover whatever you could help us with, it would just be a matter of time, and you would be dead.”

It was at this point that Bryan Orion made a terrible mistake. Tired and exhausted, fearing for his life and seeing no way out, he complied. “Fine,” he said, “I will help you as long as you don’t kill anyone.”

“How nice to hear that Mister Orion,” said Doctor Loy, “All we need to do is create a cascade reaction that can get the entire moon into a state which is blurred, but in the temporal direction. That paper details how slight variations in speed might have been used by the immortals to get an object of any given size into such a state. We need to effect the entire moon, so that the entire moon can be moved through time. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Bryan, “but why would you need my help? You obviously don't care about the rules banning this ancient technology, and you have the paper which was apparently has the last bit of information you need.”

“Well,” said Dr. Loy, “we need to know the rate at which speed changes at any given time, but it needs to be too exact for someone to calculate how much time and distance have changed each...”

“And you can't use the derivative because,” asked Bryan.

“Derivawhat?” said Dr. Loy.

Bryan, realizing the problem went beyond lacking a single piece of information, sighed and said, “fine, I'll do the mathematics that you need, if you promise to let me go once it's finished.”

“Then we will begin immediately,” said Doctor Loy.

Time passed. Bryan had worked for four hours straight and he was amazed at the progress he had made. While ruthless, the SMO's system of organizing labor was astounding. Bryan had literally hundreds of moon-slaves at his call to assemble whatever plan he developed.

Because there would be no safe way to test such a massive construction, Bryan had to make sure he checked every detail of the device as best as he could. The main problem was that some tools such as a basic slide-rule or trig-tables were not available anywhere on this planet, so he had to assign dozens of moon slaves to do the job of a single small calculation device. The other problem was that, while the article Bryan had brought with speculated the old ones used nanotechnology, the SMO was into

megatechnology, making things as big and as loud as possible, so the only construction methods available were in the large scale.

So far, with the help of Doctor Loy and the others, Bryan had them construct a massive device, over ten meters in length, which still needed a few more components. He also still needed to develop the reflectors to place on the other ends of the moon.

Being able to do technical work in the area where he had trained in college made Bryan feel somewhat better, despite the circumstances. He began to imagine that the moon-based time-machine he was developing could be used, somehow, to defeat the SMO. In fact, the SMO would need his help to use the device, Bryan thought, so he could possibly subvert whatever plans the SMO had for it.

Bryan had also got to know more about the moon-slaves, particularly Bobbi 'The Pill' Neckbreaker. It turned out that Bobbi was the foreman of the moon-slaves. When Bryan asked him for which moon slaves, Bobbi simply said, "All of them."

He considered himself a foreman in the great tradition of the legendary Phinneas Gage, whom he taught Bryan a song about. The song went as follows;

We got a new foreman in town today,
But he wasn't quite the same,
He was the best damn foreman we ever did have,
And Phinneas was his name.

Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
That rod went through his head!
Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
They said he should be dead!

Her per-son-al-i-ty changed,
And wouldn't yours too,
If a hole in your head,
A metal rod did blew.

Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
After the accident he was a jerk!
Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
He had to quit his work!

He then joined a circus act,
And traveled from town to town,
But I still think, that he his,
American all around.

Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
He's fighting all the way!
Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
For the good 'ol USA!

Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
His name lives on today!
Phinneas, Phinneas Gage,
For the good 'ol USA!

Bryan recognized the name America as one of the two supercontinents on Valusian Earth, but didn't have a chance to ask Bobbi what a “you essay” was.

Construction had completed, and Bryan was exhausted, but they still would not let him sleep. It had been fifteen hours since they began construction, twenty-eight since he had last got any sleep. They had kept him awake by feeding him some of those damnable cactatoes that had been laced with stimulants. The other cactatoes, the ones with the arms and legs, had continued their orbit over the SMO's castle, not attacking, not contacting anyone, just waiting for the SMO to try something, which he was just about to.

Bobbi 'The Pill' Neckbreaker and Helga escorted Bryan out of the office where he had been doing most of his work, and where the main one of the machines, appearing as a 9-meter long bicycle handlebar made out of spot-welded metal panels, was. The other machines were somewhat more attractive, appearing as giant metal flowers whose petals had been turned towards the ground. There were a half-dozen of these other machines, placed evenly around the moon's golden cities.

As he was being escorted to the SMO, Bryan noticed he was holding one loose screw that had been meant for the device. Bryan shrugged it off and put it into his pocket.

Bryan entered the SMO's chamber, still loud with the moans of the moon-slave miners, carrying a device that was yet another piece of centuries old salvage like the additional brain modules, shield and laser. It was a small remote control that could supposedly transmit sophisticated information to control the giant device. Helga snatched the remote from his hand and gave it to the SMO.

"We are on the dawn," said the SMO, "of my ultimate achievement in misery of sentients. Today I will use this giant moon-time-machine to extend my control to the entirety of this planet's history! This planet was populated millennia ago and I will travel back to every century and do to it

what I have done to this one – only worse!” Bryan had a lump in his throat and the SMO continued, “But this device is far too dangerous to test with me on the moon. Prepare for launch.”

Bryan wondered what the SMO had planned to evade the Cactanimal Rebellion. His thoughts were soon answered when, instead of moving towards the bay for spaceships, the SMO sat back down in his throne and the whole room began to rumble. Looking down, Brian saw two massive doors closing between them and the mining moon slaves. Once the door had closed there was a sudden thrust upward and then, amazingly, normal gravity.

“How did it work?” the SMO asked the gray-haired man with the brain module, who had just entered.

“Perfect,” said the man, “Our duplicate of the cactanimals’ shield protected us from their energy blasts just as theirs did from ours. And I might add that the artificial gravity due to rotation is functioning better than we could have hoped. The giant spaceship that we built around your castle is a colossal success.”

“Very good, a perfect stalemate. Except I can activate the moon-time-machine through the forcefield, correct?”

The man nodded, and then Bryan knew why they had asked him so much about how the cactanimals might have been able to communicate through their force field. Things were looking bad, but Bryan still waited for the SMO to ask him how to operate the moon-time-machine. That’s when things got worse.

“Bobbi 'The Pill' Neckbreaker,” said the SMO, “you’ve seen Bryan every step of the way, correct?”

“Yes I have,” said the giant man.

“Extrapolate from what you saw. What buttons do I have to hit to send the moon exactly one day into the future?” asked the SMO.

Bobbi began to read off the buttons as the SMO entered them. Bryan yelled “No!” and jumped towards them, but Helga grabbed him, and then held him over the edge of the platform, which despite the closed doors was still a significant drop. The SMO laughed maniacally.

The large projection monitor showed the moon in its full profile. As the SMO entered commands into the remote control the moon blurred slightly, as if it was a reflection in a rippling pond, rather than something real. The moon then violently flashed back into being fully visible with a great burst of white light, and then zipped off the screen.

“What the hell was that?” asked the SMO.

“I-I-don’t know,” said the gray-haired man, “this isn’t what’s supposed to be happening!”

It certainly wasn’t, and Bryan pulled the loose screw out of his pocket and looked at it in a very worried manner. He imagined what must have happened, the panel that the screw was supposed to secure had burst off, knocked something else down, which had blocked a valve and on and on.

Nanotechnology may have had taken longer to fabricate, but megatechnology was not without its achilles heel as well.

The SMO said, “Pull us back, out of the planetary and lunar orbits!”

The man with the gray hair pushed buttons frantically and the spaceship lurched sideways. The view on the projection monitor zoomed back, until both the planet and the moon could be seen in their full profile. The moon was spinning at a reckless speed, faster and faster, in circles around the planet!

“What’s going on?!? What has he done to my moon!” yelled the SMO, pointing at Bryan Orion who was now hanging dangerously over the edge of the platform.

Bobbi looked at the readings on the remote control that the SMO was holding and said, “Looks like tha moon's a moving forwards in time quicka than it should, through tha periods of its future rotations.”

The moon spun faster. “Stop it!” yelled the SMO, “Anyone!”

“I don’t know!” screamed Bryan. Helga had set him down.

The moon continued to spin circles around the planet, like an insane ceiling fan set on full power.

X. What's Happening Up There?

Hedy had got a good night's sleep, and she assumed Vagrond had too, even if he was getting hungry. Their spaceship was still delayed, and Vagrond was also getting very impatient. Vagrond and Hedy were taking a short walk outside, when they looked up and, since some of the smog had cleared, noticed something very important.

The moon was shooting across the sky at breakneck speeds. It went from horizon to horizon in four seconds, flat, then three and a half seconds, then less. It was as if it was in some sort of mad race around the planet.

"It looks like Bryan needs my help up there," said Vagrond, "I'd better take off now. My cape's only a little torn, and there's lots of tall buildings, so it shouldn't be too much trouble."

Hedy, smiling, asked, "Can I come with you?"

Vagrond closed his big eyes slightly, and then opened them again and said, "Maybe."

XI. The End of The World

On the projection screen the moon's movements could be seen, but then, almost unnoticeably at first, the planet began moving also. Slowly, silently, it swayed from side to side with the circular motion of the moon.

"The moon's gravity, it must be affecting the planet!" said someone, but Bryan could barely hear it. His and everyone's eyes were focused on the cosmic dance before them.

The planet's swaying became more and more pronounced, until it must have been moving hundreds of thousands of kilometers in every second, then, suddenly, a slip occurred, the planet moved 'just that much' too far, and it collided with the moon.

The two shapes, now fused together, sat oddly still in the sky on the screen for a moment. Then, not even making a sound, they both flattened into each other sending huge cracks into the planet, from which a liquid, magma Bryan suspected, oozed onto the moon. After five minutes, it was finished and an oblong planet-moon hybrid with easily half of its surface uninhabitable now drifted along in the former planet's orbit.

No one talked. Everyone just stood there, their eyes on the screen, their mouths agape. Suddenly the screen shimmered, and Bryan looked over and saw the gray haired man operating its controls. On the screen appeared the members of the Cactanimal Rebellion.

They wasted no time and started saying, "You bastard, you have destroyed the moon AND our home planet!" He said this as if one or the other would have been pretty bad, but both was truly unacceptable.

The SMO turned immediately to the gray-haired man and yelled, "Fire!" The man pushed a button on his remote and the SMO's fission beam fired past the cactanimals' shields. It went unhindered by any forcefields because they both had to be taken down temporarily during communication as Bryan had suspected. The beam shot straight at the cactanimal ship and blasted it to pieces in a brilliantly fiery explosion that was snuffed out in an instant.

"You...you killed them all," said Bryan, who was now shaking, "Those rebels, and...and...I don't know how many on the planet and the moon!" Helga, Bobbi, the SMO and the gray-haired man were now all staring at Bryan. "Vagrond was down there! You might have killed my new partner, and I just met him yesterday!" Bryan now fell to his knees.

"You are a very lucky man, Bryan Orion," said the SMO, "I need you alive to figure out what went wrong, and to contact an outside system in case nobody else survived!" The gray-haired man was holding the pile of forms Bryan had brought yesterday, and threw them the floor by Bryan, who had collapsed.

All was quiet for a moment. Then the gray-haired man's remote started blinking and he said to the SMO, "Uh, it appears that there's a, uh, magical pixie that can fly through space or something coming towards the ship."

"What?" Said the SMO.

Bryan looked up at the screen and yelled ecstatically, "Vagrond!" On the screen the Giant Space Lizard could be clearly seen floating towards the SMO's space station, with a cord tied around his waist to something in tow.

"Blast him!" Yelled the SMO.

“It’s too late,” said the white-haired man, “he’s already to us!”

A loud ripping noise was heard, and then a louder, continuous hissing noise. The door out, opposite the SMO’s throne, suddenly buckled inward with a single hit from Vagrond’s right arm. Vagrond growled as he ran forward on all fours.

Neckbreaker and Helga set themselves up to stop the attack, placing themselves between Vagrond and the SMO. Vagrond got up on his hind legs as he reached them and struck Bobbi “The Pill” Neckbreaker with his right arm in an open-handed chop that knocked the man screaming backwards off the edge of the platform. Before Helga could react, Vagrond pivoted on his left foot and landed a mighty kick on her stomach with his right foot, sending her off the platform also.

Vagrond then turned towards the throne, quickly realized which person was the SMO, then yelled and ran forward on his hind legs, grabbing the man by his throat with one hand and jumping up into the air into the neon sign, crashing the SMO into the O in ‘Overlord’ in a massive hail of sparks.

The sparks died down, and Vagrond jumped back down to the platform. It was clear that the SMO was dead, his robe was burnt, his skin was charred and he was motionless. Vagrond’s wild eyes calmed and revealed fear at what he had just done. He stepped back, turning to Bryan.

“Damn, I didn’t mean to kill him, I just got kind of freaked out, you know, when the planets crashed together,” said Vagrond, his eyes now betraying shame, “but that was a really close one, Bryan, I almost got caught in the planet’s gravity and trapped between it and the moon!” said Vagrond, obviously still shook up from the ordeal.

Bryan didn't respond happily, "I built the machine that did that," he said solemnly.

"Well," Vagrond didn't quite know what to say, "we'd better get back to the boss. He, uh, had probably better tell the local police that there's big problems with the policing on this planet," Vagrond looked around nervously, "oh and that I killed their political leader." Vagrond paused for a moment. "In self defense. Plus we have one request for asylum."

"What?" asked Bryan. He picked up the stack of papers and followed Vagrond out to where he had made a makeshift air-lock out of a door, ripped off and shoved into the hole he'd made to get in. Sitting on the floor was what looked like a mummy.

Vagrond proceeded to remove the surgical bandages, and underneath was a diving suit, complete with artificial lung and helmet. Vagrond removed this suit, underneath which were more bandages, underneath which was a girl!

She was young, slightly attractive by Bryan's judgement, and had short spiky hair. She was wearing a white vest made out of two triangular pieces of fabric and bearing the words "Leisure Class."

"Are you OK?" Asked Vagrond.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Hedy, "didn't even feel any pressure differences thanks to the bandages," she then saw Bryan, "Oh, hello."

"Hedy Lamarr, this is Bryan Orion, and vice versa," Vagrond introduced them.

"You saved one person from that planet?" asked Bryan, still with a very glum look on his face.

“Yeah, I would have saved more, but I had no idea you were going to destroy the planet!” Vagrond said. Bryan sighed deeply at this somewhat insensitive remark. Vagrond tried to say, “well, half of the planet is still there...” but got cut off by a loud beeping inside his cape.

Vagrond removed the large, clunky, intrasystem radio receiver from his cape and put it up to his ear opening, “Hello?”

“THIS IS SPACE TRAM PLEASE STATE FORM OF PICKUP REQUIRED,” the walky-talky said.

“Uhhh,” said Vagrond, thinking for a moment, “we're on a small space station, the only one in orbit, around a kind of planet moon thing. It's the only light orbiting the planet and it's pretty low, that's how I found it too.”

“EXCUSE ME SIR, WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY PLANET-MOON THING?”

Brian covered his face and Vagrond did the best he could to explain. Within two hours the Space Tram shuttle had picked up Bryan, Vagrond and Hedy and taken them to Vrylaunt, the planet from which Vorpgrind held office. Bryan found it impossible to pay attention. By action or inaction, he had caused an entire planet and its moon to be destroyed. He realized this was something that would weight heavily on his conscious for a long time.

Epilogue

Bryan and Vagrond stood nervously outside Vorpgrind's office. It was in a tall building, lined with windows but since the windows faced the offices and Bryan and Vagrond were in a hall, it was again uncomfortably warm and unlit. Vagrond was wearing a sweater to deal with it, this one with a complete “alpha” on it. Bryan was wearing the same clothes he had been wearing for the past two days, rolling the screw he had missed in his pocket over and over again.

Bryan felt sick to his stomach. By action or inaction, he told himself again, he had caused an entire planet and its moon to be nearly destroyed. This was far from what he had expected from working as a simple property inspector for the local government.

Bryan knocked slightly and heard “come in, come in.” He opened the door revealing a brightly lit office and Vagrond stepped happily into the full spectrum lights that were an obvious benefit of being a lizard politician. The smell of orange tea wafted from the room.

Bryan looked up, afraid to make eye contact. Vorpgrind sat at his desk. His face was quite short for a GSL, and he had the telltale cracks near his eyes that betrayed centuries of age. Also showing his age, his armored skin was quite pale and nowhere near as reflective as Vagrond's, looking more like scratched and worn steel. Vorpgrind wore a powder blue suitcoat with a white shirt and light blue tie.

“Ah, yes. Good work, boys, good work indeed!,” said Vorpgrind.

Vagrond grinned, “you mean it Vorpgrind?”

“Yes, yes. Had I known that a veritable cult had appeared underneath our metaphorical noses, I certainly would not have sent you boys in! But I did, and you managed to not only do your job, but disenfranchise the leadership of said cult. Good show!”

“But, what about that dude I killed?” asked Vagrond.

“Well, you told me about that already via our conversation with the Space Tram's radio, and in the time it took you boys to get here I already have contacted the law enforcement authority for this county. They were kind enough to understand that you acted in self defense, and as such no charges will be filed.”

“Uh, that's great I guess,” said Vagrond, a little surprised there were no consequences, “but what about the people on the planet and the moon?” As Vagrond said this, Bryan looked at the floor again, unable to make eye contact.

“Oh yes,” said Vorpgrind, “I was meaning to tell you about that. Do look up, Bryan, I prefer to converse vis a vis.”

Bryan hesitantly looked up at the old GSL, and their eyes met. Vorpgrind's eyes were smaller than usual for a GSL, but still much larger than Bryan's. There was no iris and the pupil took up most of the eye, making it much more black than a human's. However emotions were usually represented in a human way and were fairly clear. Right now Vorpgrind looked serenely calm.

Vorpgrind said, “since you left, local law enforcement has also checked the new moon-planet hybrid. You will remember that the planet was sparsely populated,” as Vorpgrind said this Bryan wondered for a split second how

this could have been done so fast, but then felt a wave of calm washing over him and felt it made sense. Vorpgrind continued, “and the point of impact covered neither the entire planet nor the entire moon.”

“Yes,” said Bryan, still making eye contact with Vorpgrind.

“Well, it turns out that you got lucky in this case. Nobody other than the individual who good Vagrond here was forced to destroy in self defense was reported as missing.”

Again, Bryan felt a twinge that this seemed unlikely, but it faded in an instant and made sense. After all, the planet was far less than half populated and as the impact covered less than half conceivably everyone could have escaped unharmed. But then, his gaze still met by Vorpgrind, he thought of something else. “But I still caused so much damage, I helped...”

“You were forced to help under duress,” said Vorpgrind, “and I think they would have gone ahead with this travesty anyway. What do you think; that their silly moon time travel contraption would have worked if you hadn't missed properly bolting a panel or something?”

Bryan felt a chill down his spine. He had been rolling the screw in his pocket again but now removed his hand from his pocket and dropped it onto the floor absent mindedly. Vorpgrind didn't notice as he was still making eye contact.

Vorpgrind continued, “they would have built their contraption with or without you, Bryan, and it would have demolished their planet and their moon with or without you. But because you and Vorpgrind were there we know what happened and can send aid to help these poor people. Not to mention granting asylum to the good Hedy Lamar.”

As Vorpgrind finished talking Bryan felt a huge relief for a moment, and then found it hard to even think about what had been bothering him. His thoughts shifted instead back to his excitement before he had first met Vagrond on the Space Tram. After all, if they had done this well on their first mission, what would the future hold?

Vagrond looked at Bryan and said, “hey, even I can tell that made you feel better!” and slapped him very lightly on the back, still causing Bryan to lurch forward.

Vorpgrind dismissed Bryan and Vagrond, telling them to take the rest of the week off and that Monday he'd have a new assignment for them.

As they were entering the elevator, Bryan chatted idly with the operator.

Vagrond noticed Vorpgrind walking up to his desk, tea cup in one hand, picking up his telephone in the other. Just as the doors closed, it seemed to Vagrond as if the person on the other end of the phone had very good news for Vorpgrind, because a wide, fanged smile lit up the elderly GSL's face as he leaned to pick up something off the floor.

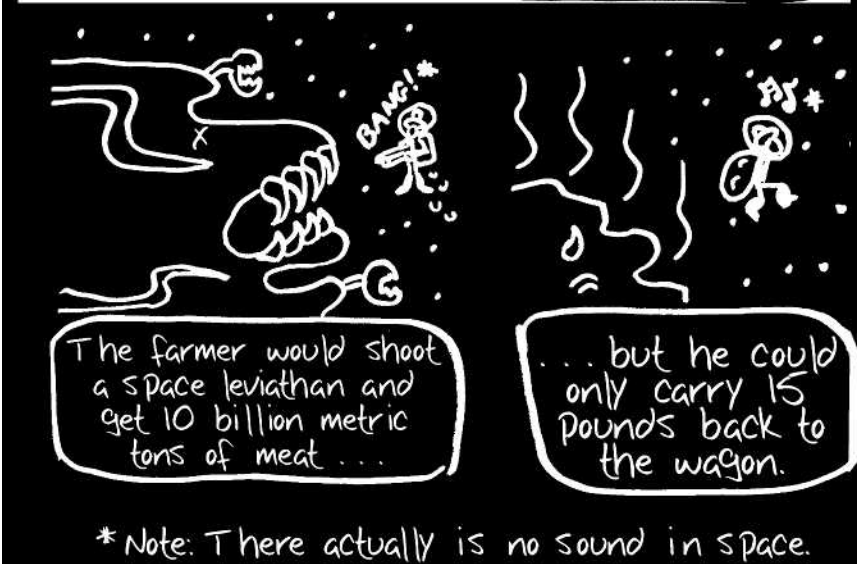
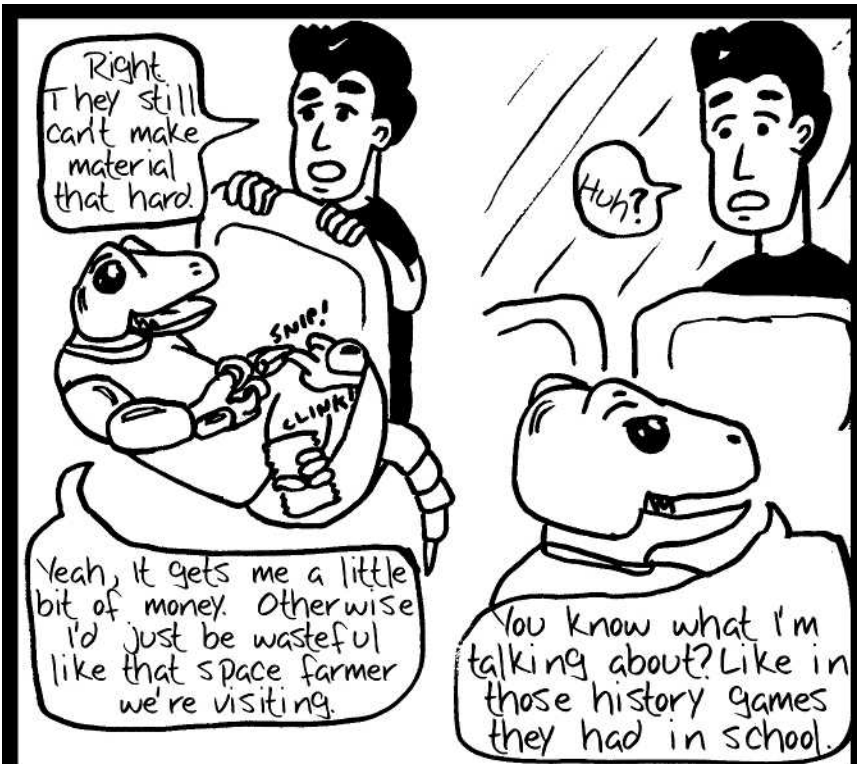
GREENSPACE



A HASTILY DRAWN, STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS COMIC

MEANWHILE...
(in space!)









But mebbe you college boys can help me. Ah founda weird meteorahht and then aftah ah touched it all this weird green stuff started a growing on mah.

Sounds like voidal fungus. Five minutes under a sun lamp should kill it. Water makes it grow ...

So it's actually good you have not bathed.

Also good ah didn't blow mah brains out! Pays tah think it through, ammah-rahght?



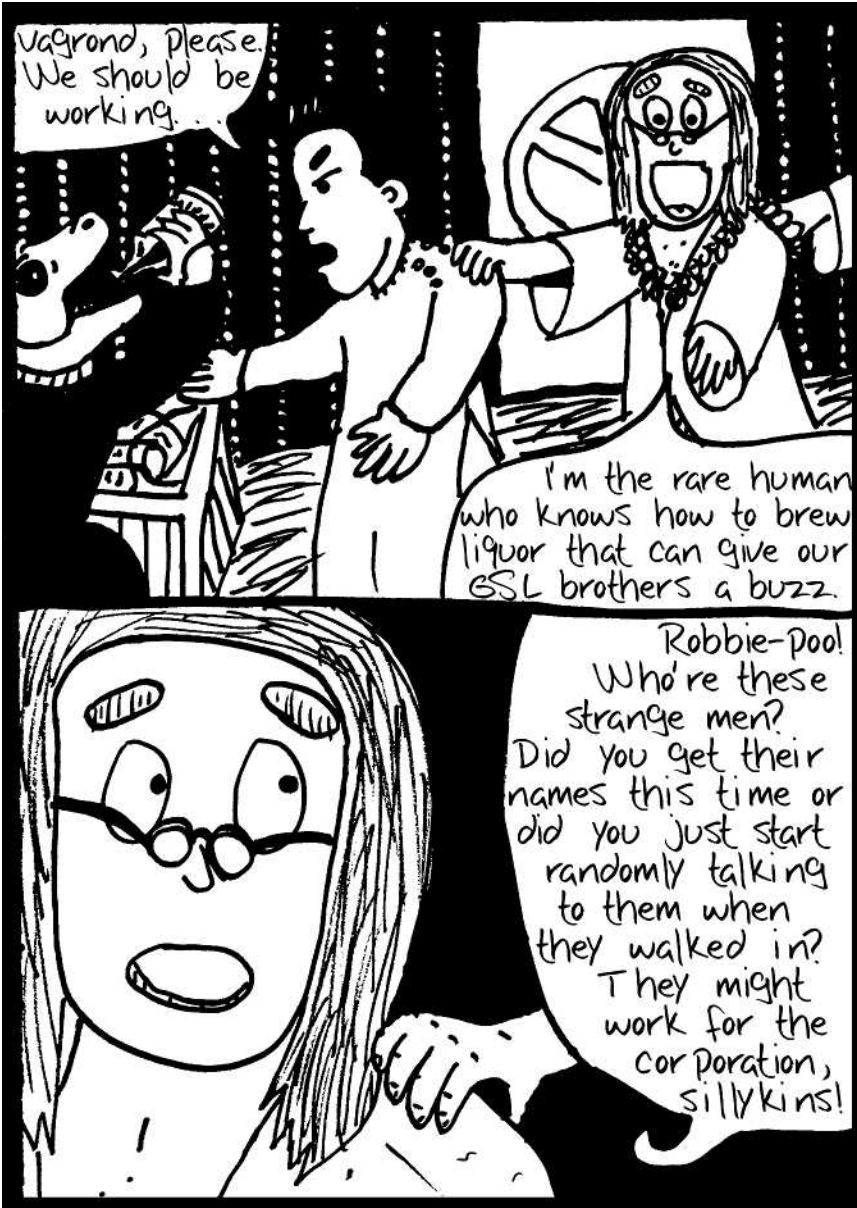














But all space farms create
radioactive particles!
That's why it's in this nebula,
very far away from any
inhabited galaxies!

Yes, but the radiation
has a half life of five
billion years! Planets
will form and life
might be forming on
them by then, and
then the radiation
will kill the newly
forming life!



Wait, wait
You're missing
something very
important... one bottle
isn't nearly enough to
get me hammered. I'll
need several more.



Here you
go, brother.

vagrond!



vagrond,
(you're on
duty!

There's a lot
more lizard
liquor in the
crates...
it would be
very non-silly
if it went
to waste!



Um ...



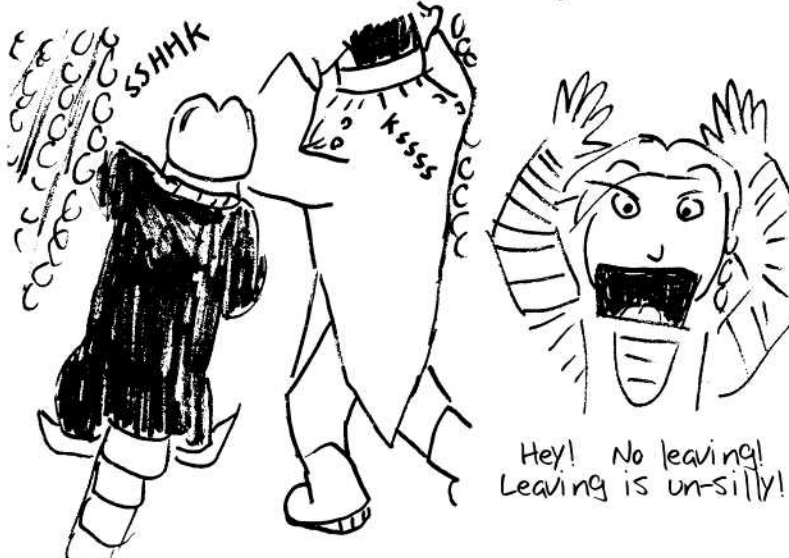
Really, I was
just messing with
Bryan. But if I can get
the rest of the bottles
"to go" then I can
promise you they
won't be wasted. myself
on the other hand...



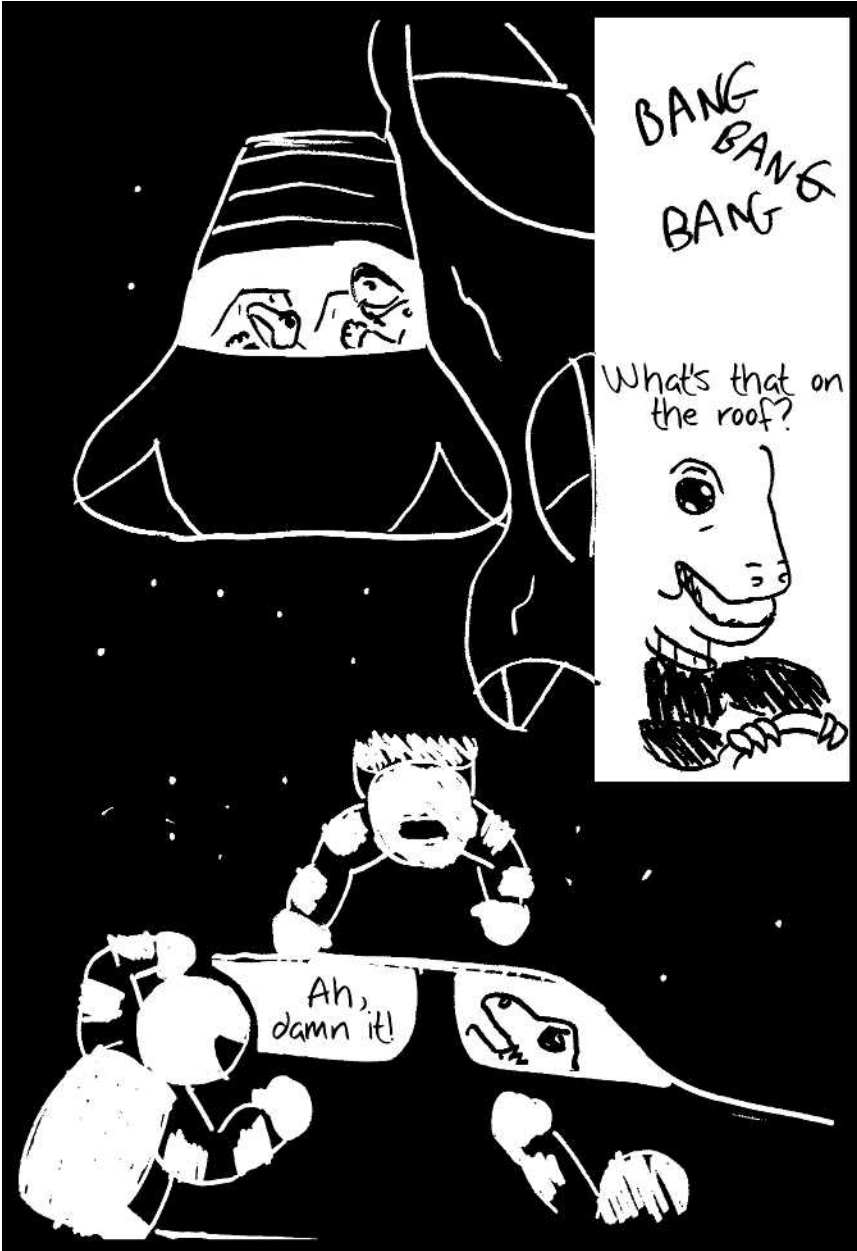
That's too bad,
mister, because
it would be un-
silly to let you
leave now! Rob!
Get them!

Get them how?

You're 2 meters
tall! You think
of something!



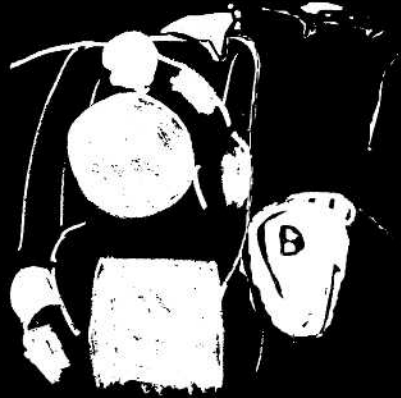
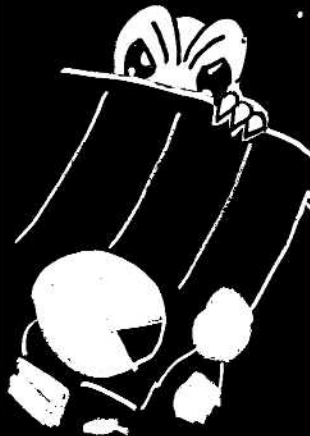
Hey! No leaving!
Leaving is un-silly!



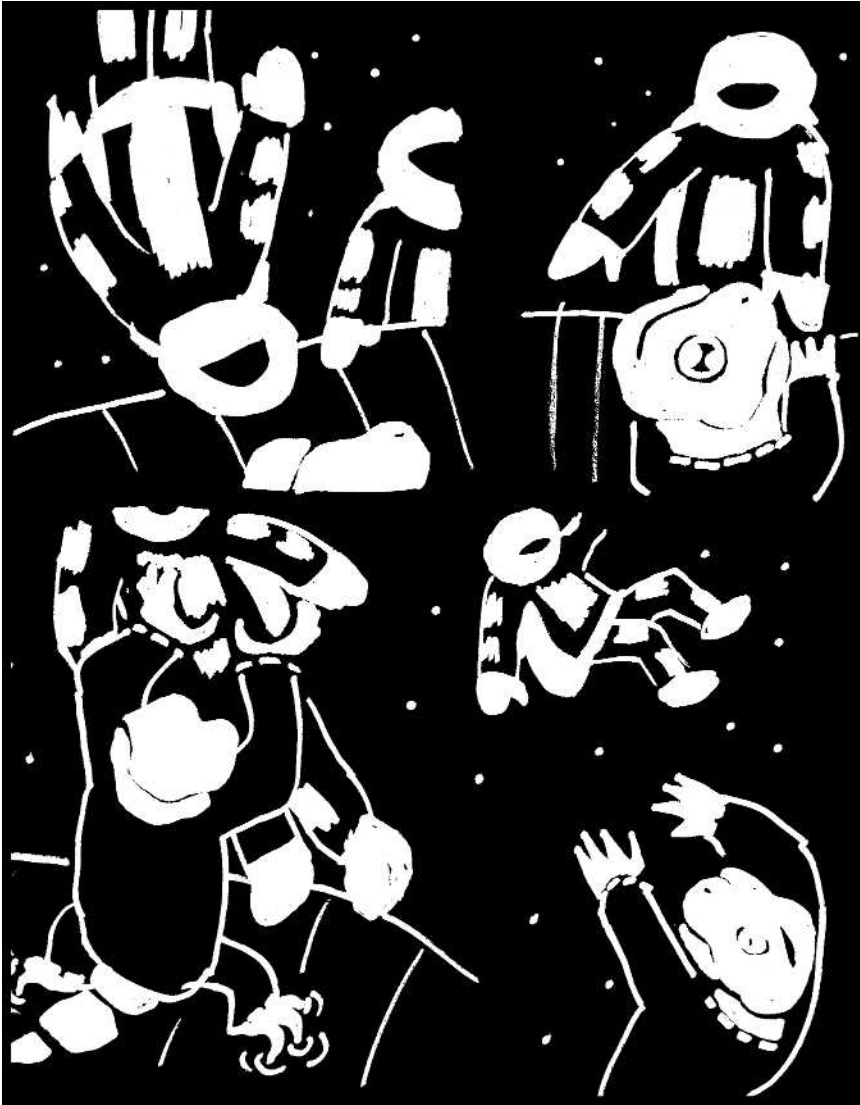
You try to get
vorpgrind to ask
him what to do.
I'll deal with the
protesters. I'll try
not to cause any
casualties...

BANG!
BANG!

Don't knock
yourself out







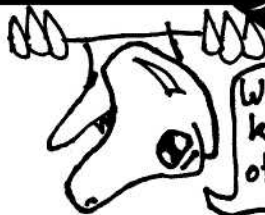




Yeah?

I Just
heard
from Mr.
Vorpgrind.

He wants
you to tear
the outer shell
off where these
squatters are
living.



Won't that
kill all
of them?



Vorpgrind doesn't
seem to think it
will de-pressurize
them. Go for it.

All right, but
no whining if
you have to fit
ten asphyx-ing
humans in here

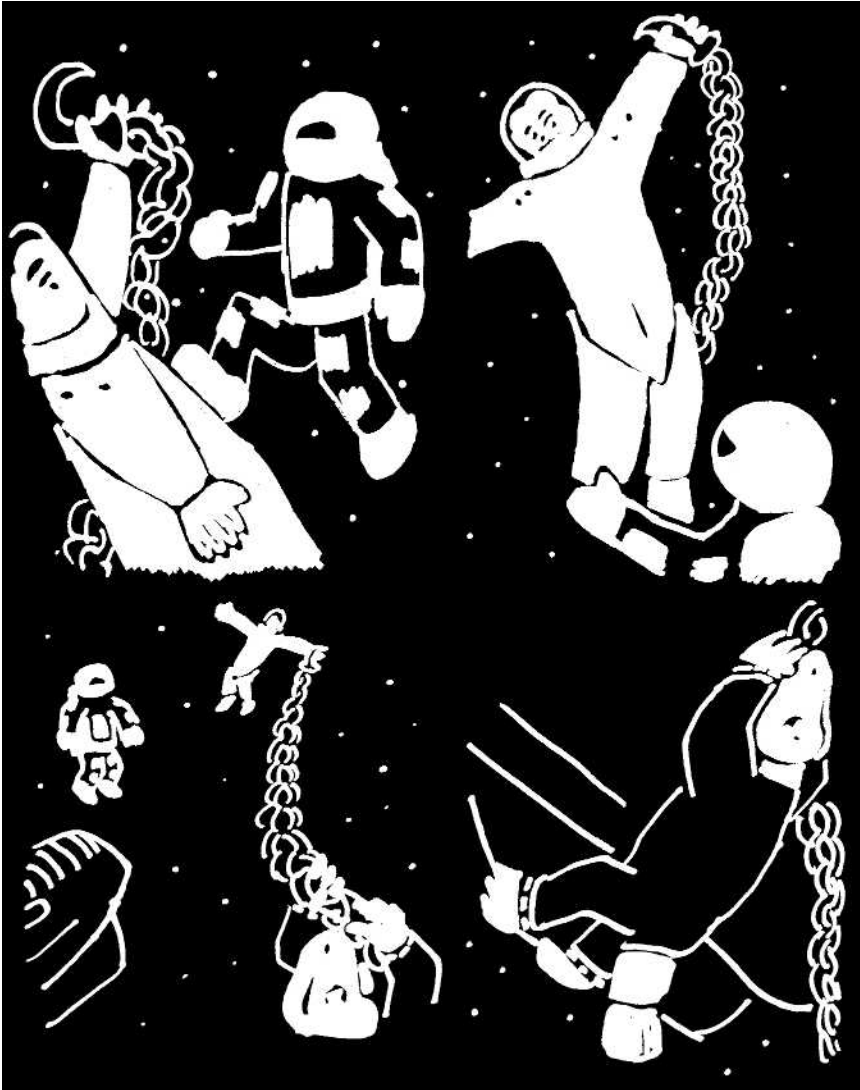
Rest assured
there will be whining







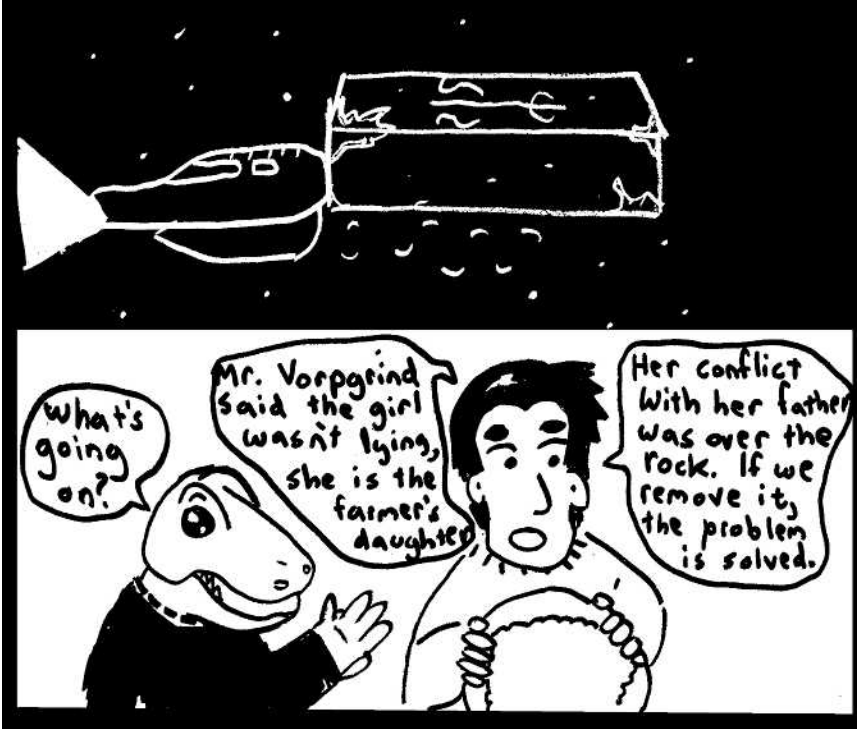




















THE K'OLI INVADES



Lizard Liquor

Vagrond sat quietly at the bar waiting for the froth at the top of his drink to die down. The drink sizzled, turning the air into ozone above it, but it sat safely in its lead container. Vagrond took a sip, it went down smoothly, without melting his esophagus. One of the benefits of being a lizard, he thought. Though the downside was that he would feel nothing from human drinks and proper GSL drinks like his would cost at least twice as much.

Well, at least the additional expense was less of a concern these days. His new job was paying decent and since he was still over a millennia too young for marriage, no one would bat an eye at him living with his parents here on Vrylaunt.

The new job had been excellent, actually. It had a few moments where Vagrond could throw some punches and knock around criminals, which was fun on its own. But most of the time it was just paperwork that finished neatly at five PM leaving plenty of time for relaxing.

Though actually, it was a little boring.

Vagrond had lost touch with most of his friends from school, back in Alpha Centauri. One of them was going to come visit next month, but until then Vagrond didn't really know any locals. Sometimes things were more lively at the bar, Vagrond had a great talk with a guy who was passing by the planet last week, trying to see if there was room for a new shoe factory on Vrylaunt. Since then, Vagrond had not seen the shoe man around, speaking poorly to the need for said shoe factory.

The bottom his empty cup smoked lightly, Vagrond set it down and gave another look around. The bar was still totally dead. Well, maybe tomorrow there would be a planet to inspect. It had been awhile, after all. Some loser would be burning uranium or something stupid and Vagrond and Bryan would be called out to set them right.

Well, if that doesn't happen, then this Saturday I'll just sneak a drink into the movie theater instead, Vagrond thought, preferably something stronger than what I've just finished...



Vorpgrind's Briefing

Vagrond groaned slightly as something pushed up on his upper lip.

Opening his eyes a little he saw it was the end of a broomstick. Opening his eyes the rest the of the way, he was greeted to a room that was dark except for a black and white image projected onto a large white screen.

Vagrond knocked the broom's end away with a grunt and sat up in the movie theater seat he had fallen asleep in. At the other end of the broom, which had snapped when Vagrond hit it, was Bryan Orion. Dressed in his collarless business suit, his combed black hair shined a bit in reflection of the movie screen. Vagrond felt off-put in his frayed flannel shirt he had just thrown on for a weekend in which he didn't particularly have to deal with anyone or anything.

"When your parents said you didn't come home from the theater, I guessed it wasn't to catch four shows in a row for free. Looks like I was right."

Vagrond felt a bit frustrated, but responded, "Isn't it Saturday? Why are you wearing your work clothes."

"Well, we both have work to do," responded Bryan, "and besides, it's Sunday now."

As Vagrond grumbled, Bryan gave the broken broom back to the usher and Vagrond shamefully handed him a tip for what was hopefully twice the broom's cost. They walked out as the usher cleaned up the bottles and other garbage from where Vagrond had been sitting.

Catching the streetcar outside the theater, Vagrond tried to shake the clouds in his head and asked Bryan, "Why do we have to go in the middle of the night? What could be so urgent?"

"Mr. Vorpgrind called us. I'm surprised this didn't happen earlier. It says in our contract that we might have late night calls up to twenty-five percent of the time, you remember."

Vagrond looked incredulously at Bryan to send the clear message that he did not remember. How could anyone read that whole contract, anyway? It was ten pages of tiny print in vague legal language. Vagrond had no problem signing it since Vorpgrind had come across as so trustworthy in their first meeting. After working a bunch of exhausting part time work, that was half the reason why Vagrond took the job anyway.

What felt like an instant later to Vagrond, the two arrived at the office.

Standing in the lower lobby was their elderly lizard boss, Vorpgrind.

Probably in his fifteen hundreds, Vorpgrind's armor had faded to light green and cracks were appearing around his eyes. He offered Vagrond and Bryan tea or coffee, and they both enthusiastically accepted the latter.

Vagrond may have had to pay twice as much for the stuff that put him asleep in the theater, but stimulants seemed to work the same on humans and lizards. This fact was echoed by Vorpgrind's mug which had paper tabs hanging from it from no fewer than three tea bags.

"Terribly sorry to bring you boys here so early," said Vorpgrind, "but we have a rather large one this morning. This one's political I'm afraid."

Vagrond took a sip of the coffee and briefly made eye contact with the boss.

The coffee must have been working as the fuzz in his head started to clear and what Vorpgrind was talking about started making more sense. Vagrond looked down and realized that his plaid shirt was covered with drool stains and various food detritus after falling asleep in the theater. Well, his boss hadn't commented on it so he shook it off and tried to pick up the conversation.

"You see," Vorpgrind said, "this K'Oli radical wore a mask, impersonating Governor Stanford, and thus escaped the holding facility during the governor's visit. His spaceship landed here and was stopped, but, while police found the mask I'm afraid they did not find the person wearing it."

"...but since you usually would call in the military..." Bryan completed Vorpgrind's thought.

"Yes," he replied, then noticing Vagrond looked confused, turned to the younger lizard, "you see, because of the recent war between the GSL-Rimerian Republic and the K'Oli central government it would be impolitic to employ military force in this case. But if I instead were to classify it as an immigration issue, I can use you and Bryan to solve it with quite little fuss."

"K'Oli?" asked Vagrond, "those guys are true aliens, right? Never met one."

"Ye-es," said Bryan rolling his eyes, "their bodies work based on the stochastic interpretation of ultra-small activity. That means they can move anything nearby which integrates to relatively non-complex on a macroscopic level..." Bryan stopped as he saw Vagrond's eyes glazing over.

"Well," interrupted Vorpgrind, "for the most part they live their lives as formless clouds of gas. I suspect this is the form in which Plandeux impersonated the governor. But please keep in mind he can move to anything relatively large, solid and simple. Pieces of unpainted metal, for an example. But not other people, dirt, or things that are mixed together like that."

"So how am I going to bust this guy's head and bring him in if he's a cloud of gas?" asked Vagrond, and added in all seriousness, "use a vacuum

cleaner or something?"

Vorpgrind looked a little worried, as if someone other than he, Vagrond and Bryan were in the room and said, "well, hopefully nothing so racist as that so as to keep our new K'Oli friends as such, right?" Vagrond looked confused as Vorpgrind continued, "after all they were amiable enough to allow us to use one of their containment devices."

Vorpgrind pointed to the cabinet where, sitting next to the coffee maker, was a kind of garish bag. It was about the same size and shape as a largish paper bag but covered with a fine grid of what appeared to be gold, and as Vagrond looked closer there appeared to be another grid of another metal under that, and yet another under that.

"Considering the sensitive nature of this," said Vorpgrind, "best if I don't tag along. I'll stay here for the time being. Once you have captured Plandeux I can thus return him to the K'Oli ambassador post haste."

With Vorpgrind's approval Vagrond walked over, picked up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. He and Bryan caught the next streetcar towards the spaceport.

The Search

The shoe-shine stand splintered into dozens of pieces with a loud crash as Vagrond bashed both of his fists into it at once. He had the forethought to yell beforehand so that its operator had safely ducked to the side and covered his head to prevent any of the debris from hitting him. Vagrond stood up, looking around furiously.

The shoe-shiner eventually sat up and looked around, replacing the baseball cap on his bald head. Vagrond was in the process of apologizing to him and giving him the address to write to for a reimbursement, something Vagrond could now do from memory. Bryan noticed and walked up to Vagrond with a stern look on his face.

“Hey!” said Bryan, “I told you at the last shoe stand you busted that Plandeux can’t control wood! It has cells and...”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Vagrond, frowning, “but I could have sworn I saw it move this time. Are you sure...” Vagrond retrieved the brightly patterned bag from the rubble and threw it over his shoulder.

“I’m pretty sure Plandeux can’t break the laws of Physics, Vagrond” said Bryan.

“Well, you would know...”

“I certainly would,” said Bryan, responding non-sarcastically to the sarcastic comment and cutting off Vagrond. Vagrond’s face switched to bemused as Bryan continued, “we might not have the tools the immortals

had but with the help of people like the K'Oli we understand physics pretty well thank you."

"Well," said Vagrond, "what do you think he could be hiding in?"

"I don't know," said Bryan, "but on a planet full of multi-cellular life like Vrylaunt probably not much. Frankly I would look for denser parts of air."

"How can I tell if air is denser by looking?" asked Vagrond, "It's air." Vagrond's face then turned sly as he added, "Wait...you've never met a true alien before have you!"

Bryan tilted his head back and gritted his teeth a moment. Slight color changes in humans were hard for Vagrond to see, but he bet Bryan turned a little red.

"That's not true," Bryan said, "I met an Urekian...once. But they actually have, you know, consistent physical bodies. I've never met a K'Oli."

"So why did you say..."

"I had read it. They look like 'dense air.' Maybe that means they look like smoke? I don't really know."

"Well, what else? I looked all around and I have a hunch he's not in the air."

"Maybe he's not here at all," Bryan said as he pointed back at the ticket desk lady, "but no one has seen anything at all since that ship landed. The traffic controllers have been watching the ship since it landed and didn't see anyone get off. Plus we checked the ship pretty thoroughly and nothing looked wrong."

Vagrond looked around the spaceport. This early on a weekend morning it was rather quiet. Only a few passengers walked towards the exit or waited by a window, all of them human or lizard. There might actually be more employees here right now than passengers, Vagrond thought, noting that other than the shoe-shiners whose stations he had wrecked there was a waitress at the restaurant, two people at the information booth, two people at the ticket stand and a bunch of traffic controllers outside against the pitch black sky.

“You think the stuff you read would have said if K’Oli could turn invisible,” said Vagrond offhandedly.

“Wait,” said Bryan, “you’re right.”

“Huh?” said Vagrond.

Bryan continued, “I mean, I’ve never seen a K’Oli but from everything I’ve read you should be able to see him if you’re looking right at him!”

“He’s still here!”

“Yes, he must be. But where?” Bryan nodded forward touching his head for a moment, then looked up and around rapidly. “Simple...something where the arrangement doesn’t matter...” he said as his eyes scanned the airport’s lobby. “The windows,” Bryan said quickly, “also look for anything made out of solid metal...polymers too, they’re made from corn but they don’t have cells themselves...”

“Poly-whats?” asked Vagrond.

“Rubber, plastic, oil. Also...” Bryan looked around some more, "Also the tiles,” said Bryan while pointing down, “if they’re made of igneous rock and not sedimentary...”

Vagrond looked a little confused but gathered the gist of what Bryan was saying. He ran towards the windows and looked up and down them, looking for anything un-windowly. Nothing was apparent. Looking back he saw Bryan on his knees in the main hallway examining the large, gray and plain floor tiles. Vagrond turned, running to the spaceport’s restaurant, and, apologizing to the waitress, overturned a stool which he noted had three metal legs - three unpainted metal legs. Remembering what Vorpgrind had said, Vagrond started flipping all of the stools at the restaurant over and yelled for the waitress to do the same. Moments later the restaurant was upside down but nothing out of the ordinary was apparent. Bryan was now at the restaurant as well, examining the bare metal mixing cups behind the bar.

Vagrond looked at him and asked, “Plandeux can only control something big, Vorpgrind said, are those big enough?”

Bryan’s brow furrowed and he said, “I don’t know!”

Vagrond and Bryan both were quiet for a moment, then Vagrond giggled slightly.

“Come on, this is serious,” said Bryan, though he had a smile on his face himself.

Vagrond and Bryan then both looked to the window. There was a family of lizards sitting by it, waiting for their ship. They must be religious, Vagrond thought, since both of the elderly parents and their daughter were wearing no colors or patterns, just different shades of gray. The daughter, though,

was screaming and having fun. It looked like she was just walking along the window, looking at the paneling and clapping her hands occasionally.

Looking. At a bump in the insulated electrical cable that was moving along slowly...

Vagrond and Bryan looked at each other then rushed towards the bump, yelling. The father grabbed his daughter and, before Bryan and Vagrond arrived, the bump pushed itself up slightly and the insulation on the cable fell flat. It looked like the cable was smoking. Or rather, that smoke seemed to be self-forming in the air, extending out from the cable, until a cloud of smoke floated freely in the air.

The cloud then turned; in actuality rotated which is something one doesn't usually expect smoke to do. But clearly visible on the cloud were bulges that looked like cartoonish eyes and a line under it like a mouth. Only slightly more sophisticated than a smiley face, Vagrond thought.

The cloud's mouth opened and Plandeux said, "Cursed metal in the middle slowed my movement to a crawl! But now I would say the cat's out of the bag, or rather the cat's off of the cord!"

The Chase

Vagrond pulled the bag off his shoulder and lunged at Plandeux, trying to grab him like a butterfly in a net. Plandeux just hovered slightly higher and Vagrond went crashing through the window.

“Oh dear it seems you can’t hover!” said Plandeux, laughing and slowly, slowly floating towards the ceiling.

Bryan rushed to the shattered window and looked outside, but Vagrond was mostly unharmed other than tearing his clothes up a bit, and a few scratches on the armor that served as his skin. Vagrond shook off the remaining shards of glass from his head.

“Is the bag OK?” yelled Bryan.

Vagrond looked down but the metal bag was completely unharmed. Picking it up he fumbled getting into the airport and fell down outside. By the time he did get in, Plandeux had made his way ponderously up to the ceiling.

Bryan yelled to the waitress who had been helping earlier to get a ladder and she ran off. For now Vagrond, whose natural armor weighed him down by over a hundred kilograms, could only look up and wish that Vrylaunt had a bit lighter gravity. Looking up, Vagrond noticed that the ceiling was made of stone tiles as well, probably so spacecraft could land on top of the building. Wait, the tiles were solid color, and looked like they might be, what did Bryan say? Ignatius?

A frantic laughing came from the ceiling and the tile directly above Plandeux split in two and fell towards the ground. No one was under it, so Vagrond didn't move. Except as the tile fell, it curved towards him! Vagrond moved sideways in a flash but the metal bag, trailing behind him, was caught on the flying tile and torn from Vagrond's grasp. Another tile that Vagrond had not noticed soared down from the ceiling and hit the bag as well. Before Vagrond could recover it, the two tiles pushed the bag in opposite directions, ripping it in two.

One of the tiles clattered on the ground immediately, but the other flew until it hit the bar. The familiar cloud of smoke rose from the further tile and started to rise into the air again.

"Fools!" said Plandeux, "Now my escape is assured!"

Plandeux's ascent was probably at a rate of about a meter every three minutes, and Vagrond was able to catch up to him this time. However, Vagrond's attempts to grab an immaterial cloud of gas were not effective. As Vagrond's punches went through the cloud again and again, Plandeux's laughter echoed through the spaceport. Vagrond finally took a step backwards.

"This isn't..." Vagrond started to say, then stopped and looked at Bryan.

"Maybe we can fold over half of the bag?" suggested Bryan.

Vagrond picked up half of the torn bag and Bryan the other half while Plandeux continued laughing madly and started a monologue. The half Bryan picked up was slightly larger but when Vagrond looked at it he couldn't help but think that even when the bag was intact it was smaller than the cloud rising above them.

“...and once I’ve assembled my army of space oddities I will begin the second phase...” continued Plandeux. Bryan handed his half to Vagrond and, taking the two halves, he climbed on top of the bar at the restaurant to get up to Plandeux’s height. He waved the halves of the bag through Plandeux, trying first to move the cloud around, then second to fold over the halves and scoop the cloud up. Neither technique was effective as Vagrond’s motions just passed through the smoke which immediately reassembled in a fraction of a second.

Vagrond shrugged his shoulders at Bryan, and threw the pieces of the metal bag to the floor in frustration. Plandeux once again slowly made his way to the ceiling. “Heads up!” yelled a wide-eyed Vagrond.

However, instead of breaking the ceiling panels again, Plandeux now only rotated them slightly in place, one after another, so that they were touching. This must have been necessary for him to move from one to another, as he was making a path of diagonally connected tiles across the ceiling. This too was not a fast process, and Vagrond roughly guessed it would take about twenty minutes for Plandeux to reach the edge of the room and continue his escape.

Bryan yelled to Vagrond, “Wait, maybe Vorpgrind has another bag we could use!” Bryan ran towards the ticket desk to use their phone.

Vagrond looked up at the ceiling again. Upon closer inspection, the smiley-face-like design that had appeared on the cloud was visible on the tiles.

This, along with the slow rate of progress, made Plandeux’s current location visible so they would have no trouble catching him, if they could just figure out how. After a few minutes the progress seemed to have stopped. What was going on?

As Vagrond watched Plandeux moved over to a light fixture and shifted the tile in such a way as to hit it with the tile that was his current body.

Remembering the tile from before, Vagrond moved out of the way as Plandeux hit the fixture repeatedly. Finally it loosened enough and fell sparking to the ground, but what Vagrond hadn't noticed was that it was falling towards the bar, where they had an open casket of lizard liquor sitting. Luckily for her, the waitress was now long gone. However Vagrond could only cover his face with his arm as the sparks hitting the volatile liquid exploded. The shock knocked Vagrond to the floor, breaking the floor tiles where he landed. Vagrond looked down and his right forearm's armor had a medium sized burn on it, but there was a round part in the middle that was oddly not burnt. Not having time to think about that, Vagrond looked up at Plandeux again. The K'Oli ceiling tiles had again begun to align slowly in a line towards the building's exit door.

Bryan had run back after hearing the noise, "What happened?"

"Oh, just a small explosion, I should be alright," Vagrond said, his right forearm not hurting anymore, "What did Vorpgrind say?"

"Uh," said Bryan, holding his hand behind his head and looking a bit dumbfounded, "all he did was yell 'Plaaaaaaaaaaaaaandeux' dramatically.

And I'm not sure, but I thought I heard him crushing one of those Styrofoam cups in his hand as he was yelling that."

"What, like the kind we were having coffee from?"

"Yeah, like those," Bryan said, looking at Vagrond.

An awkward silence hung over the shattered remains of the airport restaurant. Moments later, Bryan's eyes lit up again.

“Wait,” said Bryan, “your shirt!”

“Yeah I know,” said Vagrond, “‘a government employee should not look like a bum blah blah,’ but I had no time to change.”

“No,” continued Bryan, “the bag doesn’t matter, we just need something complex enough. Your shirt looks like cotton, plus it has a pattern on it!”

“I guess so, and it didn’t get torn or burned so bad yet either,” responded Vagrond. He took the shirt off, revealing the even less sophisticated government-employee-like sleeveless stained white shirt underneath. Folding the flannel shirt into a loose bundle he thought, yes, this was much larger than the half of the bag he had discarded.

Plandeux hadn’t made his way very far and the timing of the waitress returning with the service ladder was perfect. Vagrond pushed the ladder up under Plandeux. Plandeux began yelling “No! No!” repeatedly but didn’t waver from his slow crawl towards the exit. Bryan carefully pushed the ladder along as Vagrond climbed up it, keeping Plandeux’s pace. Upon arriving at the top, Vagrond punched a left hook to the ceiling tiles, shattering them and catching them in his folded shirt held in his right hand. The shirt-bundle pulsed madly in every direction, but not so much as to tear the cloth or loosen Vagrond’s grip. After a few moments of screaming, the tile pieces clattered to the bottom of the bundle and the air seemed to puff up the top half.

“Curses,” said Plandeux, trapped in his gaseous form, “this is but a minor setback.”

Vagrond climbed down, holding the bag triumphantly. Bryan raised his fist in success, and the waitress and the gray-clad lizard family, who had been watching from a safe distance, clapped enthusiastically.



Vorpgrind's Assessment

A short public transit ride later, Plandeux was safely contained and on his way back to his homeworld. Vagron and Bryan were sitting around the small folding table in the lobby area in front of the front desk in Vorpgrind's building. Bryan had declined the coffee, planning to get some sleep later in the morning. Vagron was drinking it eagerly, thinking he'd probably just

tough it out and stay up. Vorpgrind was giving them Monday off anyway, so might as well not waste it since Sunday was already trashed.

Vorpgrind finished saying, "...so excellent work. Though due to the rather liberal K'Oli justice system he'll probably be free fairly soon. But I doubt he will hassle us on Vrylaunt again in any case."

"What was his problem anyway?" asked Vagrond.

"Didn't you listen to his monologue?" said Bryan, rolling his eyes, "he wants to militarize the K'Oli."

Vorpgrind cut in, "well, to be more specific he wants the K'Oli to be more like us, I'm afraid. In fact rumor has it he has even taken a humanoid wife-servant to this end. Counter us by being more like us undoubtedly."

"Huh?" asked Vagrond.

"Humans and their constructs have a bit of a warrior's reputation in the galaxy," Vorpgrind continued, "not unearned I fear. The high proliferation of the immortals and their works is a consequence of the truth in that idea. In any case, we will one day be aware we do not own the universe, and I hope we are not judged too harshly."

Vagrond's mind had wandered off so he didn't catch the repeat of the monologue. He had really only asked out of habit, and had picked up as much of answer as he needed - Plandeux was a warlord. Vagrond's eyes drifted down at his right arm. It would probably take a week to heal, but wouldn't leave a mark. That reminded Vagrond...

It was in college. Several of his friends were in the Esh Zay Pay fraternity, though of course Vagrond was barred because, like most lizards, he wasn't

Rimerian. The fraternity had many children of privilege in it and had spawned many captains of industry and politicians. As such, legend had it that members of the fraternity branded each other with a circular mark which would be secretly revealed at job interviews and so forth. The secret mark was supposed to be a ticket to wealth and power. Everyone Vagrond knew in the frat denied this, but one day when Vagrond was visiting, and it was late into a party when everyone was piss drunk, Vagrond had found a metal ladle with a long handle. Vagrond, completely wasted, insisted that the ladle was the mythical brand. His friend Benny, also completely wasted, insisted that it was a spoon, which was true, and also insisted that there was no way they could get it hot enough to brand someone, which turned out not to be true when Vagrond applied the brand to his own forearm.

A trip to the emergency room was luckily avoided through cold water and some ice cubes, but the burn mark persisted on Vagrond's arm for a few days. After it healed it was only another few days before the mark was completely gone, leaving not even a trace of Vagrond's youthful indiscretion.

As Vagrond rode the street car home, he thought about the burn on his arm now, which looked similar and would probably be gone in the same amount of time. He would bet money that the unburned circle in the middle of it - the circle of his armored skin that was still as bright green and as hard as always - was exactly where he had been branded at Esh Zay Pay.

As the car clattered along the rail Vagrond stood quietly and held the support bar, looking out the window. He spent the rest of the trip wondering about what the Aurons had really intended when they created the Giant Space Lizard people so long ago.

Vagrond, Bryan, and Vorpgrind will return in:

Remainder of the Immortals

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